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# STRONGHAND

A Tale of the Disinherited

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "THE MISSOURI OUTLAWS," "PRAIRIE FLOWER," "THE INDIAN SCOUT," ETC.

REVISED AND EDITED BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN

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# STRONGHAND.

## CHAPTER I.

### AN EXCHANGE OF SHOTS.

TOWARDS the second half of June—which the Navajoe Indians call the “straw-berry moon” in their harmonious language—and in the year of grace 1843, a horseman suddenly emerged from a thick clump of oaks, sumachs, and mahogany-trees, entered the savannah extending between the Sierra de San Saba and the Rio Puerco, or Dirty River, one of the most mournful and melancholy regions imaginable, at a gallop, and, instead of following the usual travellers’ track, began, without any hesitation, crossing the desert in a straight line.

This resolution was a mark of great folly, or a proof of extraordinary daring on the part of a solitary man, however brave he might be.

However, whatever the motives that might determine the traveller, he continued his journey rapidly, and buried himself deeper and deeper in the desert.

This person was a man of from twenty-five to thirty years of age, belonging to the pure Mexican race, of average height, and possessed of elegant manners; while his every gesture, graceful though it was, revealed far from ordinary strength. His face, with its regular features and bright hue, denoted frankness, bravery, and kindliness; his black eyes, haughty and open, had a straight and penetrating glance; his well-cut mouth, adorned with dazzling white teeth, was half concealed beneath a long brown moustache; while his chin, of too marked an outline, perhaps, denoted great firmness of character.

As for his dress, it was the Mexican costume in all its picturesque richness. His brood-brimmed vicuna-skin hat, decorated with a double gold and silver *golilla*, was carelessly set on his right ear, and allowed curls of luxurious black hair to fall in disorder on his shoulders. He wore a jacket of green velvet, magnificently embroidered with gold, under which could be seen a worked linen shirt. An Indian handkerchief was fastened round his neck by a diamond ring. His *calzoneras*,



also of green velvet, held round his hips by a red silk gold-fringed *fa-ja*, were embroidered and slashed like a jacket, while two rows of pearl-set gold buttons ran along the opening that extends from the boot to the knee. His vaquera boots, embroidered with pretty designs in red thread, were fastened to his legs by silk-and-gold garters, from one of which emerged the admirably-carved hilt of a long knife. His zarape, of Indian fabric and showy colours, was folded on the back of his horse, an animal full of fire, with fine legs, small head, and flashing eye. It was a true prairie mustang, and its master had decorated it with the coquettish elegance peculiar to Mexican horsemen.

In addition to the knife we referred to, and which the horseman wore in his right boot, he had also a long American rifle laid across his saddle-bow; two six-shot revolvers in his girdle; a *machete*, or species of straight sabre, which was passed, unsheathed, through an iron ring on his left side; and, lastly, a *reata*, or lasso, of plaited leather, rolled up and fastened to the saddle.

Thus armed, the man we have just described was able to make head against several adversaries at once, without any serious disadvantage. This was a consideration not at all to be despised in a country where a traveller ever runs the risk of encountering enemies, whether man or beast.

While galloping the horseman carelessly smoked a husk cigarette, only taking an absent and disdainful glance at the coveys of birds that rose on his approach, or the herds of deer and packs of foxes which fled at his approach.

The savannah, however, was already beginning to assume a more gloomy tinge; the sun, now level with the ground, only appeared on the horizon as a red unheated ball, and night was soon about to cover the earth with its dense gloom. The horseman drew up the bridle of his steed to check its speed, though not entirely stopping it, and, casting an investigating glance around him, seemed to be seeking a suitable spot for the night.

After a few seconds of search, his determination was formed. He turned slightly to the left, and proceeded to a half-dried-up stream that ran a short distance off, and on whose banks grew a few prickly shrubs and a clump of some dozen larches, forming a precarious shelter against the mysterious denizens of the desert that prowl about at night in search of prey.

On drawing nearer the traveller perceived to his delight that this spot, perfectly hidden from prying glances by the conformation of the ground and a few blocks of stone, offered him an almost certain shelter.

The journey had been tiring, and both man and horse felt themselves worn with fatigue.

The horseman, as an experienced traveller, first attended to his steed, which he unsaddled and led to drink; then, after hobbling the animal, for fear it might stray and become the prey of wild beasts, he stretched his zarape on the ground, threw a few handfuls of Indian corn upon it, and then thought about himself.

Mexicans, when travelling, have behind their saddle two canvas bags, called *alforjas*, intended to carry food, which it is impossible to procure in the desert; and these, with two jars filled with drinking-water, form the sole baggage with which they travel enormous distances and endure intense privations and fatigue.

The horseman opened his *alforjas*, sat down on the ground with his back against a rock, and, while careful that his weapons were within reach, began supping philosophically on a piece of *tasajo*, some maize tortillas, and goat's cheese as hard as a flint, the whole being washed down with water.

This repast, which was more than frugal, was soon terminated. The horseman, after cleaning his teeth with an elegant gold toothpick, rolled a *pajillo*, smoked it with that conscientious beatitude peculiar to the Hispano-Americans, and then wrapped himself in his zarape, shut his eyes, and fell asleep.



Several hours passed; and it is probable that the traveller's sleep would have been prolonged for some time, had not two shots fired a short distance from him, suddenly aroused him from his lethargy.

The traveller, thus unpleasantly awakened, seized his weapons, concealed himself behind a rock, and waited. Then, as the attack was not renewed, he rose softly, and carefully looked around him.

Not a sound disturbed the majestic solitude of the desert. But this sudden tranquillity after the two shots, instead of reassuring the traveller, only augmented his anxiety.

The night was clear, and, so to speak, transparent; the sky, of a deep blue, was studded with sparkling stars, and the moon shed a white and melancholy light that allowed the country to be seen for a long distance.

At all hazards he saddled his horse; then, after concealing it in a rocky cavity, he lay down, placed his ear to the ground, and listened. Then he fancied he could hear, a long distance off, a sound, at first almost imperceptible, but which rapidly approached; and he soon recognised in it the wild galloping of several horses.

Was it a hunt or a pursuit. But who would dream of hunting in the middle of night? The Indians would not venture it, while white and half-breed trappers only rarely visited these deserted regions, which they abandoned to the savages and border-ruffians—utter villains who, expelled from the towns and pueblos, have no other shelter than the desert.

The traveller rose from the ground.

Suddenly the shrieks of a woman or girl burst forth on the night, with an expression of terror and agony impossible to depict.

The stranger, leaving his horse in its shelter, dashed forward in the direction whence the cry came, leaping from rock to rock, with the feverish speed of the brave man who believes himself suddenly called by Providence to save a fellow-being in danger.

Still prudence did not wholly desert him; and, before risking himself on the plain, he stopped behind a fringe of larch-trees, in order to try and find out what was going on.

This is what he saw: Two men whom, from their appearance, he at once recognised as belonging to the worst species of prairie-runners were pursuing a young girl. But, thanks to her juvenile agility—an agility doubtless doubled by the profound terror the bandits inspired her with—the maiden bounded like a startled fawn across the prairie, leaping ravines, clearing every obstacle, and gaining at each moment a greater advance on her pursuers, who were impeded by their vaquera boots and heavy rifles.

A few minutes later, and the maiden had reached the belt of trees behind which the traveller had concealed himself, when suddenly one of the bandits raised his rifle and pulled the trigger.

The girl fell, and the horseman seemed to change his mind—for, instead of advancing, he drew himself back and stood motionless, with his finger on the trigger, ready to fire.

The pirates rapidly approached, talking together in that medley of English, French, Spanish, and Indian which is employed throughout the Far West.

"Hum!" said a hoarse and panting voice; "what a gazelle! I really thought she would escape us."

"Yes, yes," the other answered, tapping the barrel of his rifle; "but I always felt certain of bringing her down when I thought proper."

"Yes, and you did not miss her, *carai!* although it was a long shot."

"Habit, compadre! habit," the bandit answered, with a modest smile.

Talking thus, the two bandits had reached the spot where the body of the girl



lay. One of them knelt down, doubtless to assure himself of the death of their victim; while the other, the one who had fired, looked on carelessly.

The traveller then drew himself up, raised his piece, and fired. The bandit, struck in the centre of the breast, sank down like a sack. He was dead.

His companion had started and laid his hand on his machete; but, not leaving him time to employ it, the traveller rushed forward, and, with a powerful blow of the butt-end of his gun on his head, sent him to join his comrade on the ground, where he rolled, half killed.

The traveller, taking the bandit's reata, then firmly bound his hands and feet; and, easy in mind on this point, he approached the maiden. The poor girl gave no sign of life, but, for all that, was not dead; her wound was slight. Terror alone had produced her fainting-fit.

The stranger carefully bandaged the wound, slightly moistened her lips and temples, and, after a short period, had the satisfaction of seeing her open her eyes.

"Oh!" she murmured, in a soft and melodious voice, "those men—those demons! Oh! Heaven! protect me!"

"Reassure yourself, senorita," the traveller answered; "you have nothing further to fear."

The maiden started at the sound of this strange voice; she fixed her eyes on the stranger without giving him any answer, and made an attempt to rise. She doubtless took this man for one of her pursuers. The latter smiled mournfully, and pointed to the two bandits.

"Look, senorita," he said to her; "you have only a friend here."

At this sight an expression of unbounded gratitude illumined the wounded girl's face, and a sickly smile appeared on her lips; but almost immediately her features grew saddened again. She sprang up, and, stretching out her right arm, towards a point on the horizon, exclaimed in a voice broken by terror—

"There, there! Look!"

The stranger turned round. A party of horsemen were coming up at full speed, preceded about a rifle-shot distance by another horseman. The stranger then remembered the furious galloping he had heard a few minutes before.

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed, clasping her hands, "save him, senor! Save him!"

"I will try, senorita," he replied, gently, "all that a man can do."

"Thank you," she said, offering him her little hand; "you are a noble-hearted man."

"You must not remain here exposed to the insults of these men."

"That is true," she said; "but what can I do?"

"Follow me behind these trees; we have not a moment to lose."

"Yes," she said, resolutely. "But you will save him!—will you not?"

"At least I will try. I have only my life to offer the person in whom you take an interest; and, believe me, senorita, I shall not hesitate to make the sacrifice."

The maiden looked down with a blush and followed her guide. They soon reached the thicket in which the stranger had established his quarters.

"Whatever happens," he said, "remain here, senorita. You are in safety in this hollow rock. For my part, I am going to help your friend."

"Go," she said, as she knelt; "while you are fighting I will pray for you."

"Yes," the stranger answered, "God listens gladly to the voice of angels."

He leaped on his horse, and, after giving a parting glance at the maiden, dashed at full speed in the direction of the new-comers. They were seven in number—



bandits with stern faces and dangerous aspect, who dashed up brandishing their weapons and uttering horrible yells.

The pursued horseman, on seeing a man emerge so unexpectedly from the thicket, rifle in hand, naturally supposed that assistance was arriving for his foes, and dashed on one side to avoid one whom he assumed, with some show of reason, to be an adversary the more. But the bandits were not mistaken when they saw the stranger not only let their prey escape, but stop in front of them and cock his rifle.

Two shots were fired at the same moment, one by a bandit, the other by the stranger, with the difference, however, that the bandit's shot, being fired haphazard, was harmless; while the stranger's, being deliberately aimed, struck exactly in the mass of his serried foes.

A few seconds later one of them let go his bridle, beat the air with his arms, fell back on his horse, and at length on the ground.

A war so frankly declared could not have a sudden termination—four shots succeeding each other with extreme rapidity on either side were a sufficient proof of this. But the stranger's position was growing critical; his rifle was discharged, and he had only his revolvers left.

The revolver, by the way, is a weapon more convenient than useful in a fight, for if you wish to hit your man you must fire at him almost point-blank, otherwise the bullets have a tendency to stray.

The stranger was, therefore, somewhat embarrassed, and was preparing in his emergency for a hand-to-hand fight when help he had been far from calculating on suddenly reached him.

The pursued horseman, on hearing the firing, and yet finding no bullets whizzed past him, understood that something unusual was taking place. Hence he turned back, and saw one of his enemies fall. Recognising his mistake, he made up his mind at once; though only armed with a *machete*, he wheeled his horse round and drew up alongside his defender.

Then the two men, without exchanging a word, resolutely dashed at the bandits. The sides were nearly equal, for of the seven pirates only four were now alive.

The attack was so sudden that the pirates had not time to reload. Two were killed with revolver-shots; the third fell with his head severed by a *machete* blow from the horseman, who was burning to take an exemplary vengeance; while the fourth, finding himself alone, fled at full speed without attempting to continue a combat which could not but be fatal to him.

The two men consequently remained masters of the battle-field.



## CHAPTER II.

### ON THE PRAIRIE.

WHEN the last bandit had disappeared, the horseman turned to his generous defender in order to thank him; but the latter was no longer by his side. He was galloping some distance off on the plain.

The horseman knew not to what he should attribute this sudden departure, till he saw him return, leading another horse by the bridle.

The stranger had thought of the young lady he had so miraculously saved, and seeing the horses of the killed bandits galloping about, he resolved at once to capture the best of them, in order to enable her to continue her journey; and when the animal was lassoed he returned slowly towards the stranger.

"Senor," the horseman said, as soon as they met again, "all is not over yet; I have a further service to ask of you."

"Speak, caballero," the stranger replied; "speak, I am listening to you."

"A woman, an unhappy girl—my sister, in a word—is lost in this terrible desert. Some of these scoundrels started in pursuit of her. I am in mortal agony, and must rejoin her at all risks; hence help me to find my sister's track."

"It is useless," the stranger answered, coldly.

"Why useless?" the horseman exclaimed, with horror; "has any misfortune happened to her? Ah! I remember now; I fancied, while I was flying, that I heard several shots. Oh, Heaven, Heaven!" he added, "my poor sister, my poor Marianita!"

"Reassure yourself, caballero," the stranger continued; "your sister is safe. Heaven permitted that I should cross her path."

"Are you stating truth?" he exclaimed, joyfully. "Oh, bless you, senor, for the happy news! Where is she? Let me see her! Alas! how shall I ever acquit my debt to you?"

"You owe me nothing," the stranger answered, in a rough voice; "it was chance that did everything. My conduct would have been the same to any other person; so keep your gratitude—which I do not ask. Who knows," he added, "whether you may not some day repent of having contracted obligations towards me?"

The horseman felt internally pained at the way in which his advances were received by a man who scarce five minutes previously had saved his life; but he said, with exquisite politeness—

"The spot is badly chosen for a lengthened conversation, caballero. We are still, if not strangers, at least unknown to each other. I trust that ere long all coldness and misunderstanding will cease between us."

"Come," the other said, "your sister is near here, and must be impatient to see you."

The horseman followed him, asking himself who this singular man could be, who risked his life to defend him and yet appeared anxious to treat him as an enemy.

All the sounds of the combat had reached the maiden's ear; she heard them while kneeling on the ground half dead with terror.



Then the firing had ceased: a mournful silence again spread over the desert—a silence more terrifying a thousand-fold than the sounds of the fight, and she remained crouching in a corner and suffering from nameless agony, alone, and far from all human help, not daring to retain a single hope.

The poor girl could not have said how long she remained thus beneath the weight of terror.

Suddenly she started; her strong nerves relaxed, a fugitive flush tinged her cheek: she fancied she had heard a few words uttered in a low voice not far from her.

She remained anxious and motionless, not daring to make a movement or utter a cry to ask for help; for a movement might reveal her presence, a cry hopelessly ruin her.

But ere long the bushes were parted by a powerful hand, and two horsemen appeared. The maiden stretched out her hands to them with an exclamation of delight, and fainted.

She had recognised in the men, who arrived side by side, her brother and the stranger to whom she owed her life.

When she recovered her senses she was lying on furs in front of a large fire. The two men were sitting on her right and left.

Somewhat in the shadow, a few paces from her, the maiden perceived a mass whose form it was impossible for her to distinguish at the first glance. It looked like a body.

The maiden was anxious to speak and thank her liberator; but the shock she had received was so rude, the emotion so powerful, that it was impossible for her to utter a word. She could only give him a glance full of gratitude, and then fell back into a state of feverish exhaustion and morbid apathy.

"It is well," said the stranger, as he carefully closed a gold-mounted flask and concealed it in his bosom. "Now, caballero, there is nothing more to fear; the draught I have administered to her, by procuring her a calm and healthy sleep will restore her strength sufficiently for her to be able to continue her journey at sunrise, should it be necessary."

"Caballero," the stranger answered, "you are really performing the part of Providence towards me and my sister. I know not how to express the gratitude I feel for an action which is the more generous as I am a perfect stranger to you."

"Do you think so?" he answered sarcastically.

"The more I examine your face the more convinced I am that I have met you to-night for the first time."

"You would not venture to affirm it?"

"Yes, I would. Your features are too remarkable for me not to remember them if I had seen you before."

There was a momentary silence, and then the stranger spoke again.

"Be it so, caballero," he answered, with a bow; "perhaps I am mistaken. Be good enough, therefore, to tell me who you are and by what concurrence of circumstances I have been enabled to render you what you call a great service."

"And it is an immense one, caballero," the stranger interrupted.

"I will not discuss that subject any longer. I await your pleasure."

"Senor, I will not abuse your patience for long. My name is Don Ruiz de Moguer, and I reside with my father at a hacienda in the vicinity of Arispe. For reasons too lengthy to explain to you, the presence of my sister (who has been at school for some years at a convent) became indispensable at the hacienda. By my father's orders I set out for El Rosario a few months ago to bring her home. I was anxious to rejoin my father; and hence, in spite of the observations made to me by persons acquainted with the dangers attending so long a journey through a desert



country, I resolved to take no escort, but start for home merely accompanied by two peons.

"My sister, who had been separated from her family for several years, was as eager as myself. For the first few days all went well; our journey was performed under the most favourable auspices, and my sister and I laughed at the anxiety and apprehensions of our friends.

"But yesterday at sunset, just as we were preparing our camp for the night, we were suddenly attacked by a party of bandits. Our poor brave peons were killed while defending us, and my sister's horse, struck by a bullet in the head, threw her. But the brave girl, far from surrendering to the bandits, who rushed forward to seize her, began flying across the savannah. Then I tried to lead the aggressors off the scent, and induce them to pursue me. You know the rest, caballero."

There was a silence, which Don Ruiz was the first to break.

"Caballero," he said, "now tell me the name of my saviour."

"What good is it?" the stranger answered, sadly. "We have come together for a moment by chance, and shall separate to-morrow. Not knowing who I am, you will soon have forgotten me. Believe me, Senor Don Ruiz, it is better that it should be so. Who knows you may not regret some day knowing me?"

"It is the second time you have said that, caballero. Your words breathe a bitterness that pains me. You must have suffered very grievously for your thoughts to be so sad and your heart so disenchanted."

The stranger raised his head, and bent on his questioner a glance that seemed to read to the bottom of his soul; the latter continued—

"Oh, do not mistake the meaning I attach to my words, caballero. I have no intention to encroach on your secrets. Every man's life belongs to himself—his actions concern himself alone. The only thing I ask of you is to tell me your name, that my sister and myself may retain it in our hearts."

"Why insist on so frivolous a matter?"

"What reason have you to be so obstinate in remaining unknown?"

"Then you insist on my telling you my name?"

"Oh, caballero, I have no right to insist; I only ask it."

"Very good," said the stranger; "you shall know it; but it will teach you nothing."

"Pardon me, caballero," Don Ruiz remarked; "this name, repeated by me to my father, will tell him every hour in the day that it is to the man who bears it that he owes the life of his children."

In spite of himself the stranger felt affected. By an instinctive movement he offered his hand to the young man, which the latter pressed affectionately. But, as if suddenly reproaching himself for yielding to his feelings, this strange man sharply drew back his hand, and said, with a roughness in his voice that astonished and saddened the young Mexican—

"You shall be satisfied."

We have said that Dona Marianita, in looking round her, fancied she saw the body of a man stretched on the ground. The maiden was not mistaken; it was a man she saw, carefully bound. It was, in a word, one of the two bandits who had pursued her so long, and the one whom the stranger had almost killed.

After recommending Don Ruiz to be patient, the stranger rose, walked up to the bandit, threw him on his shoulders, and laid him at the feet of the young Mexican, perhaps rather roughly—for the pirate, in spite of the thorough Indian stoicism he affected, could not suppress a yell of pain.

"Who is he, and what do you purpose doing with him?" Don Ruiz asked.

"This scoundrel," said the stranger, "was one of the band that attacked you; we are going to try him."



"Try him?" the young gentleman objected; "we?"

"Of course," the stranger said, as he removed the bandit's gag. "Do you fancy that we are going to trouble ourselves with the scoundrel till we find a prison in which to place him? No, no; that would be madness. When the snake is dead the venom is dead too; it is better to try him."

"But by what right do we constitute ourselves judges of this man?"

"By what right?" the stranger exclaimed. "The Border Law, which says, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Lynch law authorises us to try this bandit and execute the sentence."

Don Ruiz reflected for a moment, during which the stranger looked at him aside.

"That is possible," the young man at length answered; "perhaps you are right. This man is guilty—he is evidently a miserable assassin; and, had my sister and myself fallen into his hands, he would not have hesitated to blow out our brains."

"Well?" the stranger remarked.

"Well," the young man continued, "this certainly does not authorise us in taking justice into our own hands; besides, my sister is saved."

"Then it is your opinion——"

"That, as we cannot hand this man over to justice, we are bound to set him at liberty."

"You have, doubtless, carefully reflected on the consequences of the deed you advise?"

"My conscience orders me to act as I am doing."

"Your will be done!" and, addressing the bandit, he said, "Get up."

The pirate rose as he was told.

"Look at me," the stranger continued; "do you know me?"

"No," the bandit said.

"Look at me more carefully, Kidd," he said, in a sharp, imperious voice.

The scoundrel, who had bent forward, drew himself back with a start of fear.

"Stronghand!" he exclaimed, in a voice choked by dread.

"Ah," the horseman said, with a sardonic smile, "I see that you recognise me now."

"Yes," the bandit muttered. "What are your orders?"

"I have none. You heard all we have been saying, I suppose, and have an opinion?"

"Yes," he answered, in a rather humble voice, but yet with a tinge of irony easy to notice, "and I think that when you hold your enemy you ought to kill him."

"What do you say to that?" the stranger asked, turning to Don Ruiz.

"I say," he replied, simply, "that as this man is not my enemy, I cannot and ought not to take any vengeance on him."

"Hence?"

"Hence, justice alone has the right to make him account for his conduct."

"And that is truly the expression of your thoughts?"

"On my honour, caballero. During the fight I should not have felt the slightest hesitation in killing him—for in that case I was defending the life he tried to take; but now that he is a prisoner, and unarmed, I have no longer aught to do with him."

In spite of the mask of indifference the stranger wore on his face, he could not completely hide the joy he experienced at hearing these noble sentiments so simply expressed.

There was a moment's silence, during which the three men seemed questioning each other's faces. At length Stronghand spoke again, and addressed the bandit—



"Go! you are free!" he said, as he cut the last bonds that held him. "But remember, Kidd, that if it has pleased this caballero to forgive you, I have not. You know me, so do your best to keep out of my way. Begone!"

"All right, Stronghand, I will remember," the bandit said, with a covert threat, and disappeared.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE BIVOUAC.

For some moments the bandit's hurried footsteps were audible, and then all became silent once again.

"You wished it," Stronghand then said, looking at Don Ruiz from under his bent brows. "Now, be certain that you have at least one implacable enemy on the prairie."

"I pity him if he hates me for the good I have done him in return for the harm he wished to do me, but honour ordered me to let him escape."

"Yours will be a short life, senor, if you carry out such philanthropic precepts."

"My ancestors had a motto to which they never proved false."

"And pray what may that motto be, caballero?"

"Everything for honour, no matter what may happen," the young man said.

"Yes," Stronghand answered, with a harsh laugh; "the maxim is noble, and Heaven grant it prove of service to you; but," he continued, after looking round him, "the darkness is beginning to grow less thick, the night is on the wane, and within an hour the sun will be up. You know my name, which, as I told you beforehand, has not helped you much."

"You are mistaken, caballero," Don Ruiz interrupted him, eagerly, "for I have frequently heard the name mentioned."

Stronghand bent a piercing glance on the young man.

"Ah!" he said, with a slight tremor in his voice; "and doubtless each time you heard that name uttered it was accompanied by far from flattering epithets."

"Here again you are mistaken, senor; it has been uttered in my presence as the name of a brave man, with a powerful heart and vast intellect, whom unknown and secret sorrow has urged to lead a strange life, to fly the society of his fellow-men, and to wander constantly about the deserts; but who, under all circumstances, even spite of the examples that daily surrounded him, managed to keep his honour intact and retain a spotless reputation, which even the bandits, with whom the incidents of an adventurous life too often bring him into contact, are forced to admire. That, senor, is what this name, which you supposed I was ignorant of, recalls to my mind."

"Can the world really be less wicked and unjust than I supposed it?" muttered Stronghand.

"Do not doubt it," the young man said, eagerly. "God, who has allowed the good and the bad to dwell side by side on this earth, has yet willed that the amount



of good should exceed that of bad, so that, sooner or later, each should be requited according to his works and merits."

"Such words," he answered, ironically, "would be more appropriate in the mouth of a priest or missionary than in that of a young man who has scarce reached the dawn of life. But no matter, your intention is good, and I thank you. But we have far more serious matters to attend to than losing our time in philosophical discussions."

"Pardon me," Don Ruiz answered; "it does not become me, who am as yet but a child, to make such remarks to you."

"I have nothing to pardon you, senor," Stronghand replied, with a smile; "on the contrary, I thank you. Now let us attend to the most pressing affair—that is to say, what you purpose doing."

"I confess to you that I am greatly alarmed," Don Ruiz replied, with a slight tinge of sadness. "What has happened to me, the terrible danger I have incurred, and from which I only escaped thanks to your generous help——"

"Not a word more on that subject," Stronghand interrupted him, quickly.

"Were I alone," said the young man, "I should not hesitate to continue my journey. A brave man, and I believe myself one, nearly always succeeds in escaping the perils that threaten him; but I have my sister with me—my sister, whose energy the terrible scene of this night has broken."

Stronghand turned away, murmuring to himself compassionately—

"That is true, poor child." Then he said to Don Ruiz, "Still you must make up your mind."

"Unfortunately, I have no choice. I shall continue my journey at sunrise, if my sister be in a condition to follow me."

"That need not trouble you. When she awakes her strength will be sufficiently recovered for her to keep on horseback; but the road is very long to Arispe."

"I know it; and it is that which frightens me for my poor sister."

"Listen to me. Perhaps there is a way for you to get out of the scrape. Two days' journey from here there is a military post, placed like an advanced sentry to watch the frontier. The main point for you is to reach this post, when it will be easy for you to obtain from the commandant an escort."

"I do not know this country; one of the two peons acted as guide, and now he is dead it is utterly impossible for me to find my way."

Stronghand looked at him with surprise mingled with compassion.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "how improvident is youth! What! imprudent boy! you dared to risk yourself in the desert and entrust to a peon your sister's precious life! But pardon me: reproaches are ill-suited at this moment."

He let his head fall on his hands and plunged into serious reflections, while Don Ruiz looked at him with mingled apprehension and hope.

After a few minutes, which seemed to last an age, Stronghand rose, seized his rifle, went up to his horse, saddled it, mounted, and said to Don Ruiz, who followed all his movements with anxious curiosity—

"Wait for me, however long my absence; do not stir from here."

Then, without waiting for the young man's answer, he started at a gallop. Don Ruiz watched the black outline as it disappeared in the gloom; he listened to the horse's foot-falls so long as he could hear them, and then turned back and seated himself pensively at the fire.

"Poor Marianita!" he murmured, with a heartrending outburst of pity.

He bowed his head on his chest, and with pale and gloomy face awaited the return of Stronghand.

We will take advantage of this delay to trace the portraits of Don Ruiz de Moguer and his sister Marianita.



Dona Mariana was a charming girl of about sixteen, graceful in her movements, with black, lustrous eyes. Her hair had the bluish tinge of the raven's wing; her skin, the warm and gilded hues of the sun of her country; her glance, half veiled by her long brown eyelashes, was ardent; her straight nose, with its pink flexible nostrils, was delicious; her laughing mouth, with its bright red lips, gave her face an expression of simple, ignorant candour. Her movements, soft and indolent, had that indescribable languor and serpentine undulation alone possessed in so eminent a degree by the women of Lima and Mexico, those daughters of the sun in whose veins flows the molten lava of the volcanoes instead of blood. In a word, she was a Spanish girl from head to foot—but Andalusian before all.

Physically, Don Ruiz was, as a man, the same as his sister was a woman. He was a thorough gentleman, and scarce four years older than Dona Mariana. He was tall and well-built, but his elegant and aristocratic form denoted great personal strength. His regular features bore an unmistakable stamp of distinction; his black eye had a frank and confident look; his mouth, which was rather large, but adorned with splendid teeth and fringed by a fine brown moustache coquettishly turned up, still retained the joyous, careless smile of youth.

Brother and sister, who, with the exception of a few almost imperceptible variations, had the most perfect physical likeness, also resembled each other morally. Both were equally ignorant of things of the world.

Hence, Dona Mariana had felt a great delight and great impatience to quit the convent when Don Ruiz, in obedience to his father's commands, came to fetch her. This impatience obliged Don Ruiz not to consent to wait for an escort. It was an imprudence that caused the misfortunes we have described. He cursed the weakness that had made him yield to the whims of a girl, and accused himself of being, through his weakness, the sole cause of the frightful dangers from which she had only escaped by a miracle.

Still the hours, which never stop, continued to follow each other slowly. The sun had risen, and its presence on the horizon immediately dissipated the darkness and heated the ground, which was chilled by the abundant and icy dew of morning.

Dona Marianita, aroused by the singing of the thousands of birds concealed beneath the foliage, opened her eyes with a smile. The calm sleep she had enjoyed for several hours restored not only her strength, but also her courage and gaiety. The girl's first glance was for her brother, who, anxious and uneasy, was attentively watching her slumbers.

"Oh, Ruiz," she said, in her melodious voice, "what a glorious sleep I have had!"

"Really, sister," he exclaimed gladly, kissing her, "you have slept well."

"That is to say," she continued, with a smile, "that at the convent I never passed so delicious a night, accompanied by such charming dreams; but it is true there were two of you to watch over my slumbers."

"Yes, sister, there were two of us."

"What?" she asked in surprise. "You were —, what do you mean, Ruiz?"

"What I say; nothing else, dear sister."

"But I do not see the caballero to whom we owe so great an obligation."

"About two hours ago he mounted his horse and left me, telling me not to stir from here till his return."

"In that case I am quite easy. His absence alarmed me; but now that I know he will return——"

"Do you believe so?" he interrupted.

"Why should I doubt it?" she continued; "did he not promise to return?"

"Certainly."



"Well, a caballero never breaks his word. He said he would come, and he will come."

"Heaven grant it!" Don Ruiz muttered.

And he shook his head sadly, and gave a profound sigh. The maiden felt herself involuntarily assailed by anxiety.

"Come, Ruiz," she said, turning very pale, "explain yourself. What has happened?"

"Nothing beyond what you know, sister. Still, in spite of this man's promise, I know not why, but I fear. He is a strange being—at one moment kind, at another cruel—changing his character, and almost his face, momentarily. He frightens and repels, and yet attracts and interests me."

"I do not understand you, Ruiz. What means this confusion in your ideas? Why this stern and strange judgment of a man whom you do not know?"

While Don Ruiz was preparing to answer the gallop of a horse became audible.

"Silence, brother!" she exclaimed; "silence! here he comes!"

The young man looked at his sister in amazement.

"How do you know it?" he asked her.

"I have recognised him," she stammered, with a deep blush. "Stay—look!"

In fact, at this moment the shrubs parted, and Stronghand appeared in the open space. Without dismounting, Stronghand, after bowing courteously to the young lady, said, hurriedly—

"To horse!—to horse! Make haste! Time presses!"

In a few minutes the two young people were riding by the hunter's side.

"Let us start," the latter continued. "*Cuerpo de Cristo*, caballero, I warned you that you were doing an imprudent action in liberating that villain."

These words sufficed to give the fugitives wings, and they started at full gallop after the bold woodranger. An hour elapsed ere a word was exchanged between the three persons; bent over the necks of their steeds, they devoured space. About eight o'clock in the morning Stronghand checked his horse and made a sign to his companions to stop.

"Now," he said, "we have nothing more to fear. When we have crossed that wood, which stretches out in front of us like a curtain of verdure, we shall see the fort of San Miguel."

"Last night I fancied that you spoke of a more distant post," Don Ruiz said.

"Yes; for I fancied San Miguel abandoned. Before I gave you what might prove a fallacious hope I wished to assure myself of the truth."

"Do you believe that the commandant will receive us?" the young lady asked.

"Certainly, senorita, for a thousand reasons. In the first place, the frontier posts are only established for the purpose of watching over the safety of travellers; and then, again, San Miguel is commanded by one of your relations."

"Do you know this commandant's name?" Don Ruiz asked.

"I was told it; he is Don Marcos de Niza."

"Oh!" Dona Mariana exclaimed, joyfully, "Don Marcos is a cousin of ours."

"In that case all is for the best," the hunter answered, coldly. "Let us continue our journey, for there is a cloud of dust behind us that forebodes us no good."

The young people resumed their gallop and entered the little fort.

"Look!" Stronghand said to Don Ruiz and his sister the moment the gate closed upon them. They turned back. A numerous band of horsemen issued from the wood at this moment, uttering ferocious yells.

"This is the second time you have saved our lives," Dona Mariana said to the partizan.

"Why count them, senorita?" he replied, with sadness; "do I do so?"



The maiden gave him a look of undefinable meaning, and turned her head away with a blush.

The post of San Miguel is composed of four square pavilions, connected together by covered ways, the inner walls of which surround a courtyard planted with lemon-trees, peach-trees, and algarobes. On this court opens the room intended for travellers, barracks, &c. The outer walls have only one issue, and are provided with loopholes, which can only be reached by mounting a platform eight feet high and three wide. All the masonry is constructed of *adobes*, or unburnt bricks.

Twenty feet beyond this wall is another, formed of cactuses planted very closely together, and having their branches intertwined. The only entrance to it is a heavy gate supported by posts securely bedded in the ground. The soldiers, standing at the loopholes of the second wall, fire in perfect shelter, and command the space above the cactuses.

On the approach of the Indians, when the Mexican moon is at hand—that is to say, the invariable season of their invasions—the sparse dwellers on the border seek refuge inside San Miguel, and there in complete safety wait till their enemies are weary of a siege.

Don Marcos de Niza was a man of about forty, short and plump, but withal active and quick. His regular features displayed a simplicity of character, marked with intelligence and decision. He was one of those educated honest professional officers of whom the Mexican army unfortunately counts too few in its ranks.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE POST OF SAN MIGUEL.

As the honour of commanding one of the border forts like San Miguel is not coveted by the brilliant officers accustomed to clatter their sabres on the stones of the palace in Mexico, it is generally only given to brave soldiers who have no prospect of promotion.

Informed by a cabo, or corporal, of the names of the guests who thus suddenly arrived, the captain rose to meet them with open arms.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "this is a charming surprise. I am delighted to see you."

"Do not thank us Don Marcos," Dona Mariana answered, smilingly. "We have only come to ask shelter and protection of you."

"You have them already. Rayo de Dios! are we not relations?"

"Without doubt, cousin," Don Ruiz said; "hence, in our misfortune, it is a great happiness to us to come across you."

"Hilloh! you have something serious to tell me," the captain continued.

"So serious," the young man said, with a bow to the partizan, "that had it not been for the help of this caballero we should be lying dead in the desert."

"Oh, my poor children! Come, dismount and follow me; you must need rest. Cabo Hernandez, take charge of the horses."



The corporal took the horses, and the young people followed the captain. Don Marcos pressed the hunter's hand and made him a sign to follow them.

"There," he said, after introducing his guests into a room modestly furnished, "sit down, children."

Refreshments had been prepared on the table. While the young people enjoyed them, the captain quitted them, and went with the hunter into another room. So soon as they were alone the two men became serious, and the joy that illumined the captain's face was suddenly extinguished.

"Well," he asked Stronghand, "what news?"

"Bad," he answered, distinctly.

"I expected it," the officer muttered, with a toss of the head; "we must push out into the savannah, in order to prove to these bandits that we are able to punish them."

The hunter shook his head several times. The captain looked at him for some minutes.

"What is the matter, my friend?" he at length asked him; "I never saw you so gloomy before."

"Because," he answered, "circumstances have never been so serious."

"Explain yourself, my friend. With the exception of a few insignificant marauders, the borders have never appeared to me so quiet."

"It is a deceitful calm, Don Marcos, which conceals a tempest."

"And yet our spies say that the Indians are not at all thinking of an expedition at present."

"It proves that your spies betray you, that's all."

"Possibly so; but still I should like some proof or sign."

"I am enabled to give you the most positive information. But is your garrison strong?"

"Sixty or seventy, about."

"In time of peace, enough; but under present circumstances I repeat to you that they are not enough, and you will soon agree with me. You must send off a courier to ask for a reinforcement of from one hundred and fifty to two hundred men. Do not deceive yourself, captain."

"Thanks for the hint. But where are the urgent reasons for doing so?"

"As you please, captain; you are the commandant of the post, and your responsibility must urge you to prudence. I will therefore abstain from making any further observations on the subject."

"You are annoyed, and wrongly so, my friend; the responsibility to which you refer demands that I should not let myself be led by vague rumours. Give me the explanation I expect of you."

"I wish for nothing more than to satisfy you; so listen to me."

At this moment the room-door opened, and Corporal Hernandez appeared. The captain, annoyed at being thus inopportunately disturbed, turned sharply round.

"Well, corporal," he said, "what the fiend do you want now?"

"Excuse me, captain," the poor fellow said, "but the lieutenant sent me."

"Well, what does the lieutenant want? Speak! but be brief."

"Captain, the sentry has seen a large party of horsemen coming at full gallop towards the fort."

"Eh," said the captain, looking uneasily at the hunter, "were you in the right? and is this troop the vanguard of the enemy you threaten us with?"

"This troop," the hunter answered, with an equivocal smile, "has been following Don Ruiz and myself since the morning."

"What is the lieutenant's opinion about these scamps?" the captain asked.



"They are too far off yet, and too hidden by the dust they raise, captain, for it to be possible to recognise them," the non-commissioned officer replied.

"That is true. We had better look for ourselves. Will you come?"

"I should think so," the hunter said, as he seized his rifle; and they went out.

Don Ruiz and his sister were talking together, while doing ample justice to the refreshments placed at their disposal. On seeing the captain, the young man rose.

"Cousin," he said to him, with a bow, "I hear that you are on the point of being attacked; and as it is to some extent my cause you are going to defend—for the bandits who threaten you at this moment are allies of those with whom I had a fight last night—pray allow me to fire a shot by your side."

"Viva Dios! Most heartily, my dear cousin," the captain answered, gaily.

"That's a fine fellow!" he whispered in the hunter's ear.

The latter made no answer. He contented himself with shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh!" Dona Mariana exclaimed, "Ruiz, what are you going to do? Stay with me, I implore you, brother!"

"Impossible, sister," the young man answered, as he kissed her; "what would our cousin think of me were I to skulk here when fighting was going on?"

"Fear nothing, nina; I am answerable for your brother," said the captain.

The girl sat down again sadly on the butacca from which she had risen, and the four men then left the room and proceeded to the *patio*, or court. Here everybody was busy. The lieutenant, an old experienced soldier, with a grey moustache and face furrowed by sabre-cuts, and whose whole life had been spent on the borders, had not lost time. While, by his order, Corporal Hernandez warned the captain, he had ordered the "fall-in" to be beaten, had placed the best shots at the loopholes, and made all arrangements to avoid a surprise.

When the captain set foot in the court he stopped, saw at a glance the wise and intelligent arrangements made by his lieutenant, and a smile of satisfaction spread over his features.

"And now," he said, "let us go and see who the enemy is."

"It is unnecessary, for I can tell you, captain," the hunter replied; "they are the pirates."

"Pirates!" Don Marcos exclaimed, in amazement. "What! those villains would dare——"

"Alone, certainly not," interrupted Stronghand, "but with the certainty of being supported by the Indians, of whom they are only the vanguard. However, unless I am greatly mistaken their attack will not be serious, and their object is probably to discover in what state of defence the post is. Receive them, then, in such a way as to leave them no doubt on this head."

"You are right," said the captain. "Viva Dios! they shall have their answer."

He then gave the corporal an order in a low voice. For some minutes a deep silence prevailed in the fort. The moments that immediately precede a contest are solemn indeed.

All at once horrible yells were heard, mingled with the furious galloping of many horses, and then the enemy appeared, leaning over the necks of their steeds, and brandishing their weapons with an air of defiance. When they came within pistol-shot, the word to fire was given from the walls, and a general discharge burst forth like a clap of thunder.

The horsemen fell into confusion, and turned back precipitately and in the greatest disorder, followed by the Mexican bullets, which, directed by sure eyes, made great ravages in their ranks at every step. Still they had not fled so fast but that they could be recognised for what they really were—that is, pirates of the prairies. Half



naked for the most part, and without saddles, they brandished their rifles and long lances, and excited their horses by terrific yells.

Two or three individuals, probably chiefs, with their heads covered by a species of turban, were noticeable through their ragged uniforms, doubtless torn off murdered soldiers; their repulsive dirt and ferocious appearance inspired the deepest disgust. No doubt was possible: these wretches were certainly whites and half-breeds.

After a rather long race they stopped to hold counsel, out of range of the firearms. They were at this moment joined by a second band. The two bands united might possibly amount to one hundred and fifty horsemen.

After a rather long discussion the pirates started again, and stopped at the very foot of the walls. Captain Niza, wishing to inflict a severe chastisement on them, had given orders not to fire, but to let them do as they pleased. Hidden by the thick cactus hedge, the bandits had suddenly become invisible; but the Mexicans, confiding in the strength of their position and the solidity of the posts and gates, felt no fear.

Reassured by the silence of the garrison, some thirty pirates, among whom were several of their chiefs, escalated the great gate in turn, and rushed towards the second wall. Unluckily for the success of their plan, the wall was too lofty to be cleared in the same way; some sought stones and posts to beat in the second gate, while others tried, though in vain, to open the one they had so easily scaled.

The Mexicans could distinctly hear the pirates in the second *enceinte* explaining to their comrades the difficulty they experienced in penetrating into the fort. The latter then threw their *reatas*, which, caught upon the posts, were tightened by the combined efforts of the men and horses, and seemed on the point of pulling the gate off its hinges.

"What are you waiting for?" Don Ruiz whispered in the commandant's ear.

"There are not enough yet in the trap," he answered; "let them come."

In fact, as if the bandits had wished to obey the old soldier, some twenty more clambered over the gate, so that there were fifty of the pirates between the cactus and the stone wall. But, all at once, every loop-hole was lit up by a sinister flash, and the bullets began showering uninterruptedly on the wretches, who, through their own position, found it impossible to answer the fire of the Mexicans. Recognising the fault they had committed, and the trap they had so stupidly entered, the pirates became demoralised, fear seized upon them, and they only thought of flight.

The Mexicans, pitiless in their vengeance, fired incessantly on the wretches, some of whom, by crawling on their hands and knees, succeeded in reaching the foot of the wall below the loop-holes. Of fifty bandits who had scaled the gate fourteen still lived; the others were dead.

"Ha! ha!" said the captain, rubbing his hands gleefully. "I fancy that the lesson will be useful."

But, on the reiterated entreaties of Don Ruiz, the worthy commandant, who in his heart was not cruel, consented to ask the survivors if they were willing to surrender, a proposition which the pirates greeted with yells of rage and defiance. These fourteen men, though their rifles were discharged, were not enemies to despise.

Still there must be an end to it. At an order from the captain the gate of the second wall was suddenly opened, and some twenty horsemen charged at full gallop the bandits, who, far from recoiling, awaited them with a firm foot. The *melee* was terrible, but short. Three Mexicans were killed, and five wounded; but the pirates fell never to rise again.

Only one of them—profiting by the disorder and the attention which the soldiers remaining at the loop-holes paid to the fight—succeeded by a miracle of resolution and strength in scaling the wall and flying. This pirate, the only one who escaped



the massacre, was Kidd. On reaching the plain he stopped for a second, turned to the fort with a gesture of menace and defiance, and, leaping on a riderless horse, went off amid a shower of bullets, not one of which struck him.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE STAY IN THE FOREST.

WHEN the fight was over, and order restored at the post, the captain bade his lieutenant have the bodies lying on the battle-field picked up and hung by the feet to the trees on the plain, so that they might become the prey of wild beasts, though not until they had been decapitated. The heads were to remain exposed on the walls of the fort.

Then, when all these orders had been given, the commandant returned to his residence, where Don Ruiz had already preceded him in order to reassure his sister as to the result of the fight. Don Marcos was radiant: he had gained a great advantage—at least he thought so—over the border ruffians.

Unfortunately, the woodranger was not of the same opinion: each time the captain smiled and rubbed his hands at the recollection of some episode in the fight, Stronghand shook his head sadly.

"What's the matter with you now?" asked the commandant. "You are, on my soul, the most extraordinary man I know. Nothing satisfies you. Hang it! I do not know how to treat you. Did we not give those scoundrels a remarkable thrashing, eh?"

"I allow it," the hunter replied, laconically.

"It is lucky you allow so much. And yet they fought bravely.

"Yes; and it is that which frightens me."

"I do not understand you."

"Was I not giving you important information when we were interrupted?"

"That is to say, you were going to give it me."

"Yes; and with your permission, now that we have no fear of being interrupted for a while, I will impart the news to you."

"I ask nothing better; but I suppose the defeat the pirates have experienced must deprive the news of much importance."

"The pirates play but a very small part in what I have to tell you."

"Speak then! I know that you are too earnest to amuse yourself at my expense."

"You shall judge for yourself the perils of the situation in which you may find yourself at any moment."

The two men seated themselves, and the commandant, who was more excited than he wished to show, made the hunter a sign to commence.

"About two months ago," the latter began, "I was at the Presidio of San Estevan. This presidio, which, as you know, is about two days' journey from here, is very important."

The captain gave a nod of assent.



"I am," the hunter continued, "on rather intimate terms with Don Gregorio Ochova, the colonel commanding the presidio. You know the savageness of my character, and the species of instinctive repulsion with which anything resembling a town inspires me; hence, I need hardly say that no sooner was my business ended than I made preparations to depart. I did not like going away without saying good-bye to the colonel, so I went to his house. I found him in a state of extreme agitation, walking up and down. On seeing me, he uttered an exclamation of delight, and exclaimed:

"Oh, Stronghand! where on earth have you been hiding? I have been seeking you everywhere for the last two hours, and have put a dozen soldiers at your heels."

"You were seeking for me, Don Gregorio!" I cried "I assure you that I was close to you, and very easy to find."

"It seems not. But here you are—that is the main point. Do you think about making any stay at San Estevan?"

"No, colonel," I answered: "my affairs are settled; I intend to start to-morrow, and I have just come to say good-bye, and thank you for your hospitality."

"Good!" he said, eagerly; "that is all for the best; but," he added, taking my hand in a kindly way, "do not suppose that it is my desire to see you depart that makes me speak thus."

"I am convinced of the contrary," I remarked, with a bow.

He continued: "You can, Stronghand, do me a great service."

"I am at your command."

"This is the matter," he said. "For some days past the most alarming reports have been spreading through the presidio."

"And what may they be?" I asked.

"It is said that the Indians, laying aside for a moment their private hatreds, and forgetting their quarrels to think only of the hereditary hatred they entertain for us, are combining to attempt a general attack on the posts, which they intend to destroy."

"The reports are serious," I remarked; "but nothing has yet happened to confirm their truth."

"That is true; but there is always a certain amount of truth in rumour."

"Is no nation mentioned by name?"

"Yes; more particularly the Papayos—that is to say, the grand league of the Apaches, Axuas, Gilenos, Comanches, Mayos, and Opatas. But the more serious thing is, always according to the report, that the white and half-breed marauders on the border are leagued with them."

"This is serious," I answered; "but pardon me, colonel; what do you purpose doing to make head against the danger?"

"That is exactly why I want you, my friend."

"I am ready to do anything that depends on myself to oblige you."

"I was certain of that answer, my friend. You understand that I cannot remain thus surrounded by vague rumours and terrors. During the last few weeks, especially, various serious events have given a certain consistency to these rumours—travellers have been murdered, and valuable waggon-trains plundered. It is time for this state of things to cease, and for us to know definitely the truth or falsehood of the rumours; for this purpose I require a brave, devoted man."

"I understand what you want, colonel," I interrupted; "seek no further, for I am the man you stand in need of. To-morrow at sunrise I will start."

The colonel thanked me warmly, and the next morning I set out."

"Well," the captain exclaimed, "and what information have you picked up?"

"This information," the hunter answered, "is of a nature far more serious than any rumour. The situation is most critical, and not a moment must be lost. I was



going to San Estevan, where Colonel Don Gregorio must be awaiting my return with impatience, when I thought of seeing whether the post of San Miguel which had been so long unoccupied had received a garrison."

"A month ago," said the captain, "Don Gregorio ordered me to come here and hold my ground, though he did not inform me of the motives."

"Well; now you know the reasons."

"Yes; and I thank you. Between ourselves, are matters so serious?"

"A hundred times more so than you think. I have traversed the desert in every direction; I have been present at the meetings of the chiefs—in a word, I know every detail of the expedition."

"*Viva Dios!* I will not let myself be surprised—be at your ease about that—but you were right in advising me to ask for help, so I will immediately——"

"Do not take the trouble," the hunter interrupted; "I will act as your express."

"What! are you going to leave us at once?"

"I must, my dear captain; for I have to give Don Gregorio an account of the mission he confided to me."

"True. In spite of the pleasure I should feel in keeping you by me, I am compelled to let you go. When do you start?"

"This moment. My horse has rested; there are still some hours of daylight left, and I will take advantage of them?"

He made a movement to leave the room.

"You have not said good-bye to Don Ruiz and his sister," the captain observed.

The hunter stopped, his brows contracted, and he seemed to be reflecting.

"No," he said: "I should lose too much precious time. You will make my apologies to them, captain. Moreover," he added, with a bitter smile, "our acquaintance is not sufficiently long, I fancy, for Don Ruiz and his sister to attach any great importance to my movements."

"I will not press you," the captain answered; "do as you please."

Five minutes later the hunter was mounted.

"Do not fail to report to the colonel," Don Marcos said, "what happened here to-day; and, above all, ask for assistance."

"All right, captain; and do not go to sleep."

"*Carai!*—I shall feel no inclination. So now, good-bye, and good luck."

"Good-bye, and many thanks."

They exchanged a last shake of the hand, the hunter galloped out into the plain, and the captain returned to his house, muttering to himself.

"What a strange man! Is he good or bad? Who can say?"

When the supper-hour arrived, the two young people, astonished at the hunter's absence, asked for him. When the captain told them of his departure, they felt grieved and hurt at his having gone without saying farewell; and Dona Mariana especially was offended at such unaccountable behaviour on the part of a caballero. Still they did not show their feelings.

At the hour for retiring Don Ruiz, more than ever eager to rejoin his father, reminded the captain of the offer of service he had made him, and asked for an escort in order to continue his journey on the morrow; but Don Marcos answered with a peremptory refusal.

Don Ruiz asked an explanation of his cousin; which he did not hesitate to give, by telling them of the conversation between himself and the hunter. Don Ruiz and his sister had been too near death to expose themselves again to the hazards of a long journey in the desert; still the young man, annoyed at this new delay, asked the captain at what period they might hope to regain their liberty.

"Oh! your seclusion will not be long," the latter replied, with a smile; "so soon



as I have received the reinforcements I expect from San Estevan, I will pick you out an escort and you can be off."

Don Ruiz, forced to satisfy himself with this promise, thanked him warmly; and the young people made their arrangements to pass the week in the least wearisome way possible.

The captain, justly alarmed by the news the hunter had given him, had made the best arrangements his resources allowed to resist any attack from the Indians. By his orders all the rancheros and small landowners established within a radius of fifteen leagues had been warned of an approaching invasion.

The majority, recognising the gravity of this communication, hastened to pack up their furniture and most valuable articles; and driving before them their horses and cattle, hurried from all sides at once to the fort, with a precipitation which proved the profound terror the Indians inspired them with.

The captain organised this heterogeneous colony to the best of his ability. The women, children, and old men were sheltered under tents made of branches, to protect them from the morning dew, while all the men capable of bearing arms were trained, so as in case of attack to assist in the common defence.

But this enormous increase of population required also an enormous stock of provisions; and hence the captain sent out numerous patrols for the purpose of procuring corn and cattle. Don Ruiz took advantage of this to make excursions in the vicinity; while his sister, in company with young girls of her own age, tried to forget, or rather cheat, the weariness of their seclusion.

The appearance of the fort had completely changed, and ten days after the hunter's departure had become a really formidable fortress. Large trenches had been dug, and barricades erected; but, unfortunately, the garrison, though numerous enough to resist a sudden attack, was too weak to sustain a long siege.

One morning, at sunrise, the sentries signalled a thick cloud of dust advancing towards the post with the headlong speed of a whirlwind. The alarm was immediately given, the walls were lined with soldiers, and preparations were made to resist the enemy.

Suddenly, on coming within gunshot, the horsemen halted, the dust dispersed, and the garrison perceived with delight that the men wore the Mexican uniform. A quarter of an hour later eighty lanceros, each carrying an infantry-man behind him, entered the fort, amid the deafening shouts of the garrison.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### A GLANCE AT THE PAST.

In Spanish America, and more especially in Peru and Mexico, all the creoles of the pure white breed falsely pretend to be descended in a straight line from the first conquistadors.

Still there are in America some families, very few in number, it is true, which can justly boast of this glorious origin.



A few leagues from Arispe, the old capital of the Intendancy of Sonora, but now greatly fallen, and only a second-class city, there stands, like an eagle's nest, on the summit of an abrupt rock, a magnificent showy mansion.

This fortress-palace—which dates from the first days of the conquest, and whose antiquity is written on its walls, which have seen so many bullets flatten, so many arrows break against them, but which time, that grand destroyer of the most solid things, is gradually crumbling away by a continuous effort, under the triple influence of the air, the sun, and rain—has never changed masters since the day of its construction.

The family is one of those to which we just now referred, whose origin dates back to the first conquerors, and whose name is Tobar de Moguer.

In 1541 Don Antonio de Mendoca, viceroy of New Spain, organised the expedition to Cibola, a very mysterious country visited a few years previously by Alvaro Nunez.

The expedition, consisting of 300 Spaniards and 800 Indian allies, started from Compostella on April 17, 1541, under the orders of Don Francisco Vasques Coronado. The officers nominated by the viceroy were all gentlemen of distinction; among them, as standard-bearer, was Don Pedro de Tobar, whose father, Don Fernando de Tobar, had been majordomo-major in the reign of Jane the Mad, mother of the Emperor Charles V.

After innumerable fatigues the expedition reached Cibola, which, instead of being the rich and magnificent city they expected to see, was only a wretched insignificant village built on a rock. Still the Indians defended themselves bravely, and several Spaniards were wounded.

The Spaniards, half discouraged by the extraordinary fatigue they were forced to endure, and the continual deceptions that awaited them at every step, but still urged on by that spirit of adventure which never deserted them, resolved after the capture of Cibola to push further on and try their fortunes once again. Thus they reached, with extreme difficulty, the last country visited by the Cabeza de Vaca, to which he had given the name of the Land of Hearts.

On reaching this place the Spaniards halted and built a town, which they called Senora, now Sonora, from which the province took its name. Don Pedro de Tamar distinguished himself very much, and, with seventeen horsemen and four foot soldiers, discovered and conquered the province of Tutaliaco.

Having married the daughter of Don Rodrigo Maldonado, he, twenty years after the expedition, accepted estates in Sonora, where he built a magnificent hacienda, called Del Toro, which had remained in the hands of the family ever since.

On November 25, 1811, the day on which we begin this narrative, the insurgents had not yet been conquered at Calderon; on the contrary, their steps had been marked by successes; from all sides Indians came to range themselves beneath their banner, and their army, badly disciplined, it is true, but full of enthusiasm, amounted to 80,000 men.

About two in the afternoon, that is to say, the time in these climates when the heat is most oppressive, a horseman, mounted on a magnificent mustang, was following at a gallop the banks of a small stream, half dried up by the torrid heat of the southern sun.

This rider appeared to be about twenty-five years of age; his features were handsome, his glance proud, and the expression of his face haughty, although marked with kindness and courtesy. He was tall and well built; his gestures, which were pleasing though not stiff, indicated a man who, through his position in the world, was accustomed to a certain deference and to win the respect of those who surrounded him.

This horseman, who had left Arispe at sunrise, had been travelling without stop-



ping or appearing to notice the stifling heat that made the perspiration run down his cheeks, so deep was he in thought. On reaching a spot where the track he was following turned sharply to the left his horse suddenly stopped.

He was at the foot of the rock on the summit of which stands the Hacienda del Toro in all its gloomy majesty. For some minutes he gazed with an expression of regret and sorrow at these frowning buildings, which doubtless recalled happy memories. He shook his head several times, a sigh escaped from his over-burdened chest, and, seeming to form a supreme resolution, he said, in a choking voice, "I will go;" and letting his horse feel the spur, he began slowly scaling the narrow path that led to the summit of the rock and the hacienda-gate.

When he reached the hacienda-gate it was open and the drawbridge lowered; but though he was evidently expected, there was no one to bid him welcome.

"It must be so," he murmured. "I return to my paternal roof a fugitive—accursed."

He crossed the drawbridge, the planks of which re-echoed his horse's footfall, and entered the first courtyard. Here he dismounted, saying, in a low, concentrated voice—

"Wait for me, my poor Bravo; you, too, are regarded in this place as an accursed one."

The noble animal, as if understanding its master's words and sharing in his grief, turned its delicate, intelligent head towards him, and gave a soft and plaintive whine. At the end of the court two men were standing on the first step of a magnificent marble staircase.

On seeing these two men the young horseman drew himself up; his face assumed a gloomy and ironical expression, and he walked rapidly towards them.

"The marquis is waiting for you, Senor Conde," one of them said.

"Very good," the strange visitor answered; "one of you can announce my arrival to his lordship my father."

The two men bowed a second time, and, with heads still uncovered, preceded the young man, who followed with a firm and measured tread. On reaching the top of the steps, one of the servants hurried forward, while the second, slightly checking his speed, continued to guide the horseman.

"Oh, my young master!" he suddenly said, in a voice broken by emotion, "what a misfortune!"

"What?" the young man asked, anxiously; "has anything happened—is my lady mother ill?"

The old servant shook his head sadly. "No," he answered; "Heaven be blessed! both are in good health: but why did you leave the paternal mansion, your lordship?"

"What has happened so terrible during my absence, Perote?"

"Does not your excellency know?" the servant asked.

"How should I know, my friend?" he answered, mildly.

"That is true, excellency; forgive me, I had forgotten it."

"Recover yourself, my good fellow," the young man said, kindly. "I know how much you love me. You have not forgotten that your wife, poor Juana, nourished me with her milk. But I know nothing; am even ignorant why my father ordered me so suddenly to come hither."

"Alas! excellency," said the old servant, "I am myself ignorant why you have been brought here; but Hernando may know."

"Ah!" said the young man, with a nervous start, "my brother is here, then?"

"Did you not know it?"

"Have I not told you that I am utterly ignorant of everything?"

"Yes, yes, excellency. Don Hernando is here, and has been here a long time."



Heaven guard me from saying anything against my master's son; but take care, sir, for Don Hernando does not love you."

"What do I care for my brother's hatred?" said the young man. "Am I not the elder son?"

"Yes, yes," the old servant repeated, "you are the elder son; and yet your brother commands here as master."

"Perote," said the young man, affectionately, "what is the motto of my family?"

"What do you mean, excellency?" the man-servant asked.

"You do not remember it," the young man continued; "then I will repeat it to you. The motto is: 'Everything for honour, no matter what may happen.' That motto dictates my conduct."

"Oh, your excellency, once again take care. I am only a poor servant, but I tremble as to what may happen."

"Do not be anxious, my old friend," he answered, with an expression of haughty pride, full of nobleness. "Whatever may happen, I will remember not only what I owe to the memory of my ancestors, but also what I owe to myself. But let us not delay any longer. His lordship must be informed of my arrival, and the slight eagerness I seem to display in proceeding to him and obeying his orders will probably be interpreted to my injury by the man who has for so many years conspired my ruin."

"Yes, you are right: we have delayed too long as it is."

"Where are you taking me?" the young man remarked. "My father's apartments are not situated in this part of the hacienda."

"I am not leading your excellency to them," he answered, sorrowfully.

"Where to, then?" he asked, stopping in surprise.

"To the red room," the old servant remarked, in a low voice.

"Oh! oh!" the young man muttered.

Perote only answered by a deep and prolonged sigh.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FAMILY TRIBUNAL.

THE Hacienda del Toro, like many feudal mansions, contained one room which remained constantly closed and was only opened on solemn occasions.

This room, situated at the end of the hacienda, was a large hall of oblong shape, paved with alternate large black and white slabs, and lighted by four lofty windows.

The young Count de Tobar had never entered this room since the day of his birth; and, however far back his thoughts reverted in childhood, he never remembered to have seen it open. Hence, in spite of all his courage, and the firmness with which he had thought it wise to arm himself for this decisive interview with his father, he could not restrain a slight start of fear.



The folding doors were open, and on reaching the threshold the young men took in the room at a single glance. At one end, on a dais covered with a *petate*, the Marquis and Marchioness of Tobar were seated, gloomy and silent, beneath a canopy of black velvet with gold fringe and tassels.

At the foot of the dais, and almost touching it, stood a young man of three or four and twenty, with handsome and distinguished features, whose elegant attire contrasted with the simple dress of the aged couple. This gentleman was Don Hernando de Tobar, younger son of the marquis.

"El Senor Conde, Don Rodolfo de Tobar y Moguer," said the guide, in a loud and marked voice.

"Show in the count," the marquis said, in a voice which was still powerful.

The man-servant retired, and the door closed upon him. The count walked up to the foot of the dais. On reaching it he bowed a second time, then drew himself up, and respectfully waited.

So profound a silence prevailed for some minutes in the room that the hearts of the four persons might have been heard beating in their bosoms. Don Hernando took running side-glances at his brother, whom the aged couple examined with a mixture of sadness and severity.

"You have arrived, then, Senor Conde," the marquis at length said, sharply.

The young man bowed, but did not answer.

"You did not display any great eagerness in obeying my invitation."

"My lord, I only received your letter late last night," the count answered, gently.

"This morning before sunrise I mounted my horse, and rode twenty leagues without stopping."

"Yes," the marquis said, ironically, "I know that; for you are a most obedient son—in words."

"Excuse me, my lord," he replied, respectfully, "but I do not understand to what you allude."

"It is because we probably no longer speak the same language," said the old gentleman, drily.

There was a silence, during which the marquis seemed to be reflecting.

"You are the elder son of the family, sir," he presently continued, "and, as such, responsible for its honour."

"I am, my lord."

"Since your birth your sainted mother and myself have striven to place before you only examples of loyalty; during your childhood we took pleasure in training you in all the chivalrous virtues which for a long succession of centuries have been the dearest appanage of our race. We continuously kept before your eyes the noble motto of our family, of which it is so justly proud. How is it then, sir, that, suddenly forgetting what you owe to our care and the lessons you received from us, you abandon the paternal roof and become a perfect stranger?"

"My lord," the young man stammered.

"It is not an accusation I bring against you, Don Rodolfo," the marquis continued, quickly; "but I expect a frank and honourable explanation of your conduct."

"My lord," the count answered, throwing up his head proudly, "my heart reproaches me with nothing. My object in obeying your orders so eagerly has not been to justify myself, but to assure you of my respect and obedience."

"I expected another answer from you, sir," the marquis continued. "I hoped to find you eagerly seize the opportunity my kindness offered you to justify yourself."

"My lord," the young man replied, respectfully, "in order that a justification may be possible, I must know the charges brought against me."



"I will not press this subject for the present; but I wish to give you an immediate opportunity to prove your obedience to me."

"Oh, speak, father!" the count exclaimed, warmly; "whatever you ask——"

"Do not be overhasty in pledging yourself," said the marquis, "before you know what I ask."

"I shall be so happy to prove my obedience."

"Be it so, sir. I thank you for those excellent feelings; hence I will not delay in telling you what you must do."

"Speak, speak, my lord!"

"My son," the marquis continued, with a slight tinge of sadness in his voice, "your mother and I are growing old; each step brings us nearer the tomb."

"Oh, father!" Don Rodolfo exclaimed.

"Do not interrupt me, my son," the marquis continued. "You are our first-born, the hope of our name and race; you are four-and-twenty years of age; you are handsome; in short, you are an accomplished cavalier, of whom we have just reason to be proud."

The marquis paused for a little while. Don Rodolfo felt himself growing more and more pale. His eyes turned wildly to his mother, who sorrowfully bowed her head.

"Your mother and I, my son," the old man continued, "may be called away soon to appear before the Lord; but by marrying you can secure the tranquillity of the few days still left us to spend on this earth."

"Father——"

"Oh, reassure yourself, count," the old gentleman continued, pretending to misunderstand his son's meaning. "I do not intend to force on you one of those marriages in which a couple united against their wish only too soon hate one another through the instinctive aversion they feel. No, the wife I intend for you has been chosen by your mother and myself with the greatest care. She is young, lovely, rich, and of a nobility almost equal to ours."

"Father!" Don Rodolfo stammered, again.

"My son!" the marquis continued; "my son, be happy, for you are about to marry Dona Aurelia del Torre Azul, cousin in the fifth degree to the Marquis del Valle."

"Oh, my son," the marchioness added, entreatingly, "this alliance will soothe my last days."

The young man was of livid pallor. He tottered, his eyes wandered hesitatingly around.

"You know my will, sir," the marquis continued; "I hope that you will soon conform to it. And now, as you must be fatigued after a long ride in the great heat of the day, withdraw to your apartments. To-morrow we will consult as to the means of introducing you to your future wife."

After uttering these words, in the same cold and peremptory tone he employed during the whole interview, the marquis prepared to rise.

By an effort over himself the young count succeeded in repressing the storm that was raging in his heart. Affecting a tranquillity he was far from feeling, he took a step forward and bowed respectfully to the marquis.

"Pardon me, my lord," he said, "but may I say a few words now?"

"Did I not say to-morrow, sir?" answered the old gentleman.

"Yes, my lord," the young man answered, sadly; "but to-morrow may be too late."

"Ah!" said the marquis, biting his lips; "and for what reason, sir?"

"Because, father," the young man said, firmly, "to-morrow I shall have left this house never to re-enter it."



"Ah, ah!" exclaimed the marquis, "then I was not deceived; what I have been told is really true."

"What have you been told?"

"Do you wish to know?" the old gentleman exclaimed; "but it is time that this pitiable farce should end."

"Sir, sir," the marchioness said, "remember that he is your son."

"Silence, madam!" the old man said, harshly; "this rebellious son has played with us long enough; the hour of punishment has pealed."

"In God's name, sir," the marchioness continued, "do not be inexorable to your child. Let me speak to him; perhaps you are too harsh with him, although you love him. I am his mother."

The old man seemed to hesitate for the moment, but immediately recovered.

"Why should I consent to what you ask, madam?" he replied, with a roughness mingled with pity; "do you not know that the sole quality of his race which this rebellious son has retained is obstinacy?"

"Oh, permit me to say, sir," the old lady continued, in a suppliant voice, "he is my son as well as yours."

"And then, my lord," Don Hernando remarked, in a mocking voice, "perhaps we are mistaken; do not condemn my brother without hearing him."

"That is well, Hernando; I am delighted thus to hear you undertake your brother's defence," said the old lady.

"Certainly, mother; I love my brother too dearly," the young man said, ironically, "to let him be accused without proof. That Rodolfo has seduced the daughter of the principal cacique of the Opatas and made her his mistress is evident, and known to all the world as true, but it is of very little consequence. But what I will never believe until it is proved to me is that he has married this creature, any more than I will put faith in the calumnies that represent him not only as one of the intimate friends of the Curate Hidalgo, but also as one of his most active and influential partisans in this province. No; a thousand times no! A gentleman of the name and blood of Tobar knows too well what honour demands to commit such infamy."

During this speech, whose deep perfidy the count recognised, he was suffering from extreme emotion. At the first words his brother uttered he started as if he felt the sting of a viper.

"Well, my son," the marquis said, "you see everybody defends you. What will you answer?"

"Nothing, father," the young man said; "because, if I attempted to justify myself you would not listen to me, and you would not comprehend me. Oh! do not mistake my meaning," he said, on seeing the marquis about to speak; "you would not understand me, father, not through want of intellect, but through pride in your honour."

"Are there two sorts of honour, then?" the marquis exclaimed, involuntarily.

"No, father," Don Rodolfo answered, calmly, "there is only one; but there are two ways of comprehending it; and my brother, who a moment back told you without incurring your disapproval that a gentleman had the right to abuse the love of a maiden and make her his mistress, but that the honour of his name would forbid him marrying her, seems to me to have studied the point thoroughly, and is better able than I to discuss it. What am I reproached with? Having married the daughter of an Indian cacique? It is true; I avow openly that I have done so; her birth is perhaps as good as mine. What is the next charge—that I am a friend of the Curate Hidalgo, and one of his firmest adherents? That is also true; and I am happy and proud of his friendship; I glory in these aspirations for liberty with which you reproach me as a crime. Faithful to the motto of our ancestors, I have



done everything for honour ; my conscience is calm ; and some day you will forgive me."

"Never!" the marquis shouted, in a terrible voice. "Begone! I no longer know you! You are no longer my son! Begone, villain! I give you my——"

"Oh!" shrieked the marchioness, "do not curse him, sir! Do not add that punishment to the one you have inflicted on him. The unhappy boy is already sufficiently punished."

"Begone!" said the marquis, in a hollow voice. "May God watch over you, for henceforth you have no family. Farewell!"

The young man rose and tottered out of the room without saying a word.

"My son, my son!" the marchioness exclaimed, in a heart-rending voice.

The implacable old man quickly stopped her at the moment when, half mad with grief, she was rushing from the dais, and pointed to Don Hernando.

"You have only one son, madam," he said, in a harsh voice.

The marchioness uttered a cry of despair, and, crushed with grief, fell senseless at her husband's feet.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE TWO BROTHERS.

AFTER quitting the red room Don Rodolfo, under the weight of the condemnation pronounced against him, with broken heart and burning head had rushed onwards, flying the paternal anger, and resolved to leave the hacienda as quickly as possible, never to return to it. His horse was still in the first yard, where he had tied it up. The young man went up to it, seized the bridle, and placed his foot in the stirrup. At the same moment a hand was laid on his shoulder. Don Rodolfo turned as if seared with a hot iron. His brother was standing before him.

"What do you want, brother?" he said, in a firm voice.

"To press your hand before your departure," the young man said.

Rodolfo looked at him for a moment with an expression of profound disdain, then unhooking the sword that hung at his side, he handed it to his brother.

"There, Hernando," he said, ironically, "it is only right that, since you will henceforth bear the name and honour of our family, this sword should revert to you."

"Brother," the young man stammered.

"I am not reproaching you," Don Rodolfo continued, haughtily. "Enjoy in peace those estates you have torn from me. May heaven grant that the burden may not appear to you some day too heavy, and that the recollection of the deed you have done may not poison your last years. Farewell for ever!" And letting the sword he had offered to his brother fall to the ground, he leaped on his horse and went off at full speed, without even giving a parting glance at those walls which had seen his birth, and from which he was now eternally banished. Don Hernando stood for a moment with hanging head and pale face, crushed by the shame and consciousness of the bad action he had not feared to commit. Already remorse was beginning to prey on him.



"Poor Rodolfo!" he muttered, stifling a sigh; "I am very guilty."

And he slowly returned to the hacienda. Count Don Rodolfo de Moguer kept the word he had given his brother: he never reappeared. Nothing was ever heard of him, and his intimate friends never saw him again after his journey to the hacienda, nor knew what had become of him.

In the meantime Don Hernando by his father's orders had succeeded to his brother's title, and almost immediately married Dona Aurelia del Torre Azul, originally destined for Don Rodolfo. The marquis and marchioness lived some few years longer. They died a few days after one another, bearing with them a poisoned sting of remorse.

But, inflexible up to his dying hour, the marquis never once made a complaint, and died without mentioning his son's name.

At the funeral a man was noticed in the crowd wrapped up in a wide cloak, and his features concealed by the broad brim of his hat being pulled over them. No one was able to say who this man was, although one old servant declared he had recognised Don Rodolfo.

Then time passed away, important events succeeded each other, and Don Rodolfo, of whom nothing was heard, was considered dead.

The Marquis de Moguer was not a wicked man as might be supposed; but as a younger son, with no other hope than the tonsure, devoured by ambition, and freely enjoying life, he internally rebelled against the harsh and unjust law which exiled him from the pleasures of the world and condemned him to the solitude of the cloister. Assuredly, had his brother frankly accepted his position as first-born, and consented to undertake its duties, Don Hernando would never have thought for a moment of defrauding him of his rights. But when he saw Don Rodolfo despise the old traditions of his race, marry an Indian girl, and make common cause with the partisans of the Revolution, he eagerly seized the opportunity.

And yet, strange contradiction of the human heart, Don Hernando deeply loved his brother; he pitied him—he would like to hold him back on the verge of the precipice down which he thrust him, as it were.

Unfortunately these reflections came too late—Don Rodolfo had disappeared without leaving a trace, and hence the marquis was compelled to restrict himself to sterile regrets. At times, tortured with the ever-present memory of the last scene at the hacienda, he asked himself whether it would not have been better for him to have had a frank explanation with his brother, after which Don Rodolfo, whose simple tastes agreed but badly with the exigencies of a great name, would have amicably renounced in his favour the rights which his position as elder brother gave him.

At the beginning of 1822, on a day of madness which was to be expiated by years of disaster, the definitive separation took place between Spain and Mexico. After the ephemeral reign of Emperor Iturbide Mexico reverted to a republic.

The Spaniards had suffered greatly during the War of Independence, as had their partisans, whose property had been burned and plundered by the revolutionists. The fatal decree of 1827, pronouncing the expulsion of the Spaniards, dealt the fatal and most terrible blow to their fortunes.

The Marquis de Moguer was one of the persons most affected by this measure, although, during the entire War of Independence and the different governments that succeeded each other, he had taken the greatest care not to mix himself up at all in politics, and remained neutral between all parties.

His friends advised him frankly to join the Mexican government, and give up his Spanish nationality. The marquis, forced by circumstances, followed their advice.

But things had greatly changed with the marquis. His immense fortune had vanished with the Spanish government. During the ten years of the War of Inde-



pendence, his estates had lain fallow, and his mines, deserted by the workmen he formerly employed, had gradually become filled with water.

The pride of the marquis was broken in this struggle against poverty; his love for his children restored his failing courage, and he bravely resolved to make head against the storm. The marquis therefore engaged a majordomo. For the first few years, all went well, or appeared to do so. The majordomo, Don Jose Paredes, to whom we shall have occasion to refer more fully hereafter, was one of those men so valuable to haciendas, whose lives are spent on horseback, whose attention nothing escapes, who thoroughly understand the cultivation of the soil, and know what it ought to produce, almost to an arroba.

But if the estates of the marquis were beginning to regain their value under the skilful direction of the bailiff, it was not the same with the mines.

What Don Hernando gained on one side he lost on the other; and his position, in spite of his efforts, became worse and worse, and the abyss of debt gradually enlarged. The marquis saw with terror the moment before him when it would be impossible for him to continue the struggle. Sad and aged by sorrow rather than years, the marquis no longer dared to regard the future, which daily became more gloomy for him.

Hence Don Hernando resided alone with his son at the Hacienda del Toro; for he had lost his wife several years before, and his daughter was being educated in a convent at the town of Rosario.

Some months before the period when our story begins ill-fortune had seemed not to grow weary of persecuting the marquis, but desirous of granting him a truce—this is how a gleam of sunshine penetrated the gloomy atmosphere of the hacienda. One morning a stranger, who appeared to have come a great distance, stopped at the gate, leading a mule loaded with two bales. This man, on reaching the first courtyard, threw the mule's bridle to a peon, with the simple remark—"For Sig.ior Don Hernando de Moguer," and, without awaiting an answer, he started down the rocky road at a gallop and was lost in the windings of the path ere the peon had recovered from the surprise caused by the strange visit. The marquis, at once warned, had the mule unloaded and the bales conveyed to his study. They each contained twenty-five thousand piastres in gold, or nearly eleven thousand pounds of our money: on a folded paper was written one word—Restitution.

It was in vain the marquis ordered the most minute researches; the strange messenger could not be found. Don Hernando was therefore compelled to keep this large sum, which arrived so opportunely to extricate him from a difficult position, for he had a considerable payment to make on the morrow.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A NEW CHARACTER.

ALTHOUGH, owing to its position on the shores of the Pacific, Sonora enjoys the blessings of the sea-breeze, still, for three hours in the afternoon, the earth, incessantly



baked by the torrid sunbeams, produces a crushing heat. Men and domestic animals hasten to seek shelter in the houses, raising in their hurried progress a white, impalpable, and calcined dust, which enters mouth and nostrils. For some hours Sonora is converted into a vast desert.

Everybody is asleep, or at least reclining in the most shady rooms, with closed eyes, and with the body abandoned to that species of somnolency which is neither sleeping nor waking.

Like that city in the "Arabian Nights," the inhabitants of which the wicked enchanter suddenly changed into statues by waving his wand, life seemed suddenly arrested at the Hacienda del Toro, for the silence was so profound: peons, vaqueros, craidos, everybody in fact, were enjoying their siesta. It was about three in the afternoon, and two gentlemen alone had not yielded to sleep, in spite of the crushing midday heat; but, seated in an elegantly-furnished *cuarto*, they had spent the hours usually devoted to slumber in conversation.

Of these two gentlemen, one, Don Hernando de Moguer, is already known to us. Years, while stooping his back, had furrowed some wrinkles on his forehead, and mingled many silver threads with his hair; but the expression of his face is gentle and timid, although clever, slightly sarcastic and eminently crafty.

As for the person with whom Don Hernando was conversing, he was a short, plump man, with a rubicund face and apoplectic look, though hardly forty years of age. Still his hair, which was almost white, his deeply wrinkled forehead, and his grey eyes buried beneath bushy whiskers, gave him a senile appearance, harmonising but little with the sharp gesticulation and youthful manner he affected. His long, thin, violet nose was bent like a parrot's beak over a wide mouth filled with white dazzling teeth; and his prominent cheekbones, covered with blue veins, completed a strange countenance, the expression of which bore a striking likeness to that of an owl.

This species of nutcracker, with his prominent stomach and short ill-hung limbs, whose whole appearance was most disagreeable, had such a mobility of face as rendered it impossible to read his thoughts. His cold blue eyes were ever pertinaciously fixed on the person addressing him, and did not reveal the slightest emotion.

He was Don Rufino Contreras, a rich landowner and a senator.

At the moment when we entered the *cuarto*, Don Hernando, with arms folded at his back and frowning brow, is walking up and down, while Don Rufino, seated on a *butacca*, with his body thrown back, is following his movements with a crafty smile. For some minutes the haciennero continued his walk, and then stopped before Don Rufino, who bent on him a mocking, inquiring glance.

"Then," he said, "you must have the sum within a week?"

"Yes," the fat man replied, still smiling.

"Why, if that is the case, did you not warn me sooner?"

"I believe you do me the justice of allowing that I am your friend?"

"If so, no matter; but let us pass over that."

"Very well. Knowing that you were in a critical position at the moment, I tried to procure the sum by all possible means. You see, my dear Don Hernando, how delicate and truly friendly my calculations were. Unfortunately, at the present time it is very difficult to get money in. In such a perplexing position, I leave you to judge what I was obliged to do. The money I must have; you have owed it for a long time, and I apply to you."

"Still I think you might have sent a peon to warn me before you left Sonora."

"I hoped to collect the required sum on my road, and not be obliged to come all the way to your hacienda."

Don Hernando made no reply, but walked up to a window, the shutters of which he threw open, and a refreshing breeze entered the *cuarto*. Don Rufino gave a sigh of relief and sat up in his *butacca*.



"Ouf," he said, "I was very tired; not through the long ride I was compelled to make this morning, so much as through the heat."

Don Hernando started at this insinuation, as if he had been stung by a serpent; he had neglected all the laws of Mexican hospitality; for Don Rufino's visit had so disagreeably surprised him, and made him forget all else before the sudden obligation of the claims of a merciless creditor. But he now rang a bell, and a peon at once came in.

"Refreshments," he said.

The peon bowed, and left the room.

"You will excuse me, caballero," the hacendero continued, frankly, "but your visit so surprised me that at the moment I did not think of offering the refreshment which a tired traveller requires so much. Your room is prepared, rest yourself to-night, and to-morrow we will arrive at a mutually satisfactory solution."

"I hope so, my dear sir. Heaven is my witness that it is my greatest desire," Don Rufino answered, as he raised to his lips the glass of orangeade brought by the peon. "Unhappily I fear that we cannot come to a settlement unless ——"

"Unless!" Don Hernando sharply interrupted.

"Unless you pay me in full what you owe me, which appears to me to be difficult."

"Ah!" Don Hernando remarked, with an air of constraint, "what makes you suppose that?"

"I suppose nothing, my dear sir; you told me you were hardly pressed."

"Well, and what conclusion do you derive from that?" the hacendero asked, impatiently.

"A very simple thing—that seventy thousand piastres form a rather round sum, and that, however rich a man may be, he does not always have it in his hands."

"But can you not wait a few days longer?"

"Impossible, I repeat; let us understand our respective positions, in order to avoid any business misunderstanding. I lent you that sum, and only stipulated for small interest, I believe."

"I allow it, senor, and thank you for it."

"It is not really worth the trouble; I was anxious to oblige you. I did so, but remember, I made one condition which you accepted."

"Yes," Don Hernando said, with an impatient start, "and I was wrong."

"The condition was that you should repay me the sum upon demand."

"Have I said the contrary?"

"Far from it; but now that I want the money, I ask you for it, and that is natural: I have in no way infringed the conditions."

"Hence, if I ask a month to collect the money you claim?"

"I should be heart-broken, but should refuse; for I want the money, not in a month, but in a week."

What most hurt Don Hernando was not the recall of the loan, painful as it was to him, so much as the way in which the demand was made. Carried away by the rage that filled his heart, he was about to give Don Rufino an answer which would have broken off all relations between them for ever, when a great noise was heard in the hacienda, mingled with shouts of joy and the stamping of horses.

"Here are my children, caballero," said Don Hernando; "not a word of this affair before them, I entreat."

"I know too well what I owe you, my dear senor," the other replied. "With your permission, however, I will withdraw."

"No, no!" Don Hernando added, "I had better introduce you at once to my son and daughter."

"As you please, my dear sir. I shall be highly flattered."



The door opened, and Don Jose Paredes appeared. The majordomo was a half-breed of about forty years of age, tall and powerfully built, with bow legs and round shoulders that denoted his capacity as a horseman.

"Senor amo," he said, "the nino and nina have arrived in good health, thanks to our lady of Carnerno."

"Thanks, Don Jose," Don Hernando replied; "let them come in."

The majordomo gave a signal outside, and the two young people rushed into the room. With one bound they were in their father's arms, who for a moment pressed them to his heart; but then he pushed them away, remarking that a stranger was present.

"Senor Don Rufino," the marquis said, "I present to you my son, Don Ruiz de Moguar, and my daughter, Dona Marianita: my children, this is Senor Don Rufino Contreras, one of my best friends."

"A title of which I am proud," Don Rufino replied, with a bow.

"Are the apartments ready, Don Jose?" Don Hernando continued.

"Yes, excellency," the majordomo said, with a radiant smile.

"If senor Don Rufino will permit it, you can go and lie down, my children," the haciendero said. "You must be tired."

"You will also allow me to rest, Don Hernando?" the senator then said. The haciendero bowed.

"We will resume our conversation at a more favourable moment," he continued, as he took a side glance at Dona Marianita. "However, my dear senor, do not feel too anxious about my visit; for I believe I have discovered a way of arranging matters without inconveniencing you too much."

And, bowing to his knees to the marquis, Don Rufino left the room, smiling with an air of protection.

## CHAPTER X.

### DON JOSE PAREDES.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since the return of Don Ruiz and his sister to the hacienda, and Don Rufino had not said a word about the money which occasioned his visit.

Everything had returned to its old condition. Don Ruiz went out on horseback in the morning with Jose Paredes, in order to watch the peons and vaqueros, leaving to his father and sister the care of doing the honours to Don Rufino. For the first two or three days Dona Marianita had been considerably embarrassed by their guest's obsequious smiles and passionate glances; but she soon made up her mind, and only laughed at the craving look and absurd posture of the stout gentleman.

It was evident to everybody that Don Rufino was seeking to obtain the hand of Dona Marianita. Don Hernando, in spite of the secret annoyance this pursuit caused him, for this man was the last he would have desired as his son-in-law, did not dare, however, let his vexation be seen.

Since his arrival at the hacienda, Don Rufino had sent off messengers in several



directions, and received letters. One morning he entered Don Hernando's study with an easy air, where the latter passed nearly the day, engaged in the most abstruse calculations. The haciennero raised his head with amazement on seeing the senator; it was the first time the latter had come to seek him in this room.

"My dear senor," Don Rufino began, as he stretched himself out on a butacca, "excuse me for pursuing you into your last entrenchments, but I want to talk seriously."

"You have done well," Don Hernando answered: "you know that I am entirely at your disposal."

"I will not trouble you long: I am not fond of lengthy conversations, and have merely come to terminate our affair."

The haciennero felt cold drops stand on his temples at this frank avowal.

"I had not forgotten you," he replied: "at this very moment I was making arrangements which I trust will enable me to discharge the debt in a few days."

"That is not the point," said Don Rufino; "I do not want the money."

Don Hernando looked at him in amazement.

"That surprises you," the senator continued, "and yet the affair is very simple. I was anxious to prove to you that you had in me not a pressing creditor, but a truly devoted friend."

"Still," Don Hernando, who feared a snare, objected: "you said to me——"

"I believed it," Don Rufino interrupted him. "Fortunately it was not so, as I have recently acquired the proof: not only have I been able to meet my payment, but I have a considerable sum left in my hands which I do not know what to do with, and which I should feel much obliged by your taking."

Don Hernando, confounded by this overture, which he had been so far from expecting from a man who had at first been so harsh with him, was silent, for he knew not what to answer.

"Good gracious!" continued Don Rufino, with a smile; "during the few days I have been with you, my dear senor, I have been enabled to appreciate the intelligent way in which you manage your immense estate. Unfortunately for you, you are short of capital just at the moment when it is most necessary; but as this is a common case, you cannot complain. The money you want I have, and I offer it to you. I trust you will not insult me by doubting my friendship."

"But," Don Hernando stammered, "I am already your debtor to a heavy amount."

"Well, what matter? You will be my debtor for a larger amount."

"I understand all the delicacy and kindness of your conduct, but I fear——"

"What?—that I may demand repayment at a inconvenient moment?"

"I will not conceal from you——"

"You are wrong, Don Hernando. I wish to deal with you as a friend, and do you a real service. You owe me seventy thousand piastres, I believe?"

"Alas, yes!"

"Why that 'alas'?" the senator asked, with a smile. "Seventy thousand piastres, and fifty thousand more I am going to hand you directly, will form a round sum, for which you will give me your acceptance payable—what date will suit you best?"

Don Hernando hesitated. Evidently Don Rufino, in making him so strange a proposal, had an object. The senator's love for his daughter could not impel him to do such a generous act; this unexpected kindness evidently concealed a snare; but what was the snare?

"You hesitate," said Don Rufino, "and you are wrong. Let us talk candidly. You cannot possibly hope to realise any profit within eight months, so it will be impossible to pay me so large a sum before that period." Then, opening his



pocket-book and taking out six bills, which he laid on the table, he continued: "Here are the fifty thousand piastres; give me an acceptance payable at twelve months' date."

Money, under whatever shape it presents itself, has an irresistible attraction in the eyes of the speculator and embarrassed man. Don Hernando felt this. Any longer hesitation on his part would therefore have been unjustifiable; hence he took the bills, and gave his acceptance.

"That's settled," Don Rufino said, as he folded the document. "My dear senor, you are really a singular man. There is more difficulty in getting you to accept money than there would be in getting another to pay it."

"I really do not know how to thank you, Don Rufino."

"Money is always opportune," the senator replied, with a laugh; "but let us say no more about that. If you have a safe man, send him off at once to cash these bills at Hermosillo."

"This very day my majordomo, Don Jose Paredes, shall set out for the *ciudad*."

"Very good. Now I have one request to make of you."

"Speak, speak. I shall be delighted to prove to you how grateful I am."

"This is the matter: now that I am, temporarily at least, no longer your creditor, I have no decent pretext for remaining at the hacienda."

"Well, what does that matter?"

"It matters a great deal. I should like to remain here a few days longer."

"Are you jesting, Don Rufino? The longer you remain at the hacienda, the greater honour you will do us."

"Very good. Now I shall leave you to your business."

When the majordomo returned to the hacienda at about eleven o'clock, Don Hernando sent for him. Without taking the time to pull off his vaquero boots Jose Paredes hurried to his master.

"Have you a good horse?" the hacendero asked.

"I have several, excellency," he answered.

"I mean by a good horse one capable of going a long distance."

"I have a mustang on which I could ride to Hermosillo and back."

"I want to send you to Hermosillo as soon as you have rested."

"I am never tired, excellency; in half an hour I shall have lassoed my horse, saddled it, and mounted, unless you wish me to defer my journey."

"The hours for the *siesta* will soon be here, and the heat will be insufferable."

"You are aware, excellency, that we half-Indians are children of the sun."

"You have an answer for everything, Don Jose."

"For you, excellency, I feel myself capable of performing impossibilities."

"I know that you are devoted to my house."

"Is it not just, excellency? For two centuries my family has eaten your bread; and if I acted otherwise I should be unworthy."

"I thank you. I am about to entrust an important commission to you."

"Be assured that I shall perform it, excellency."

"Very good. You will start at once for Hermosillo, where you will cash these bills for fifty thousand piastres."

"Fifty thousand piastres!" the majordomo repeated, with surprise.

"It surprises you, my friend, to whom I have confided my most secret affairs, that I have so large a sum to receive."

"I ask nothing, excellency; I am here to carry out your orders."

"This money has been lent me by a friend whose kindness is inexhaustible."

"Heaven grant that you are not mistaken, excellency."

"What do you mean, Don Jose? To what are you alluding?"

"I make no allusion, *mi amo*; I merely think that friends who lend fifty thousand



piastres from hand to hand, excellency, to a man whose affairs are in such a condition as yours are very rare at present."

Don Hernando sighed. He shared his majordomo's opinions, though he would not allow it.

"You can take three or four persons with you," he said presently, "for an escort."

"What use is an escort, excellency? You want your money here? I will buy a mule at Hermosillo, and load the money on it, and it will take a very clever fellow to rob me, I assure you."

"Still, it would be perhaps better to have an escort."

"Permit me to remark that it would be the way to set robbers on my track."

"*Viva Dios!* I should be curious to know how you arrive at that conclusion."

"A single man is certain to pass unnoticed when the roads are infested with bandits of every description."

"Hum! what you are saying is not reassuring, Don Jose," Don Hernando remarked, with a smile.

"On the contrary, the bandits to whom I am referring, excellency, are clever—too clever—and it is that which ruins them. They will never imagine that a poor devil of a half-breed, leading a sorry mule, can be carrying fifty thousand piastres."

"Well, I will not argue any longer; do what you think proper."

"All right, excellency; I will deliver the money to you without the loss of a real, I promise you."

And he took up the bills, hid them in his bosom, and after bowing to his master left the study. Jose Paredes went straight to the corral, where in a few minutes he had lassoed a mustang with small head and flashing eye, which he began saddling, after he had carefully rubbed it down. Then he inspected his weapons, laid in a stock of powder and ball, placed some provisions in his alforjas, and mounted. But, instead of leaving the hacienda, he proceeded to a separate building, and twice gently tapped at a window, before which he pulled up. The window opened, and Don Ruiz appeared.

"Ah, is that you, Paredes?" he said; "well, wait a minute."

"Do not disturb yourself, nino," said the majordomo. "I am going a journey."

"A journey?" the young man asked, in surprise.

"Yes; but only for a few days. The marquis has sent me."

"Can you tell me the reason why you are going, and whither?"

"The master will tell you himself, nino."

"Good; but I suppose you have some other motive for coming?"

"Yes, nino; I wished to give you a piece of advice before leaving. During my absence watch carefully the man who is here."

"Whom do you mean, Paredes?"

"The senator, Don Rufino Contreras."

"For what reason?"

"Watch him, nino, watch him! And now, good-bye for the present."



## CHAPTER XI.

### ON THE ROAD.

**JOSE PAREDES**, though he had in reality only fifty leagues to go, a distance which in most European countries is comfortably performed in a railway carriage in a few hours, was obliged, on account of the bad state of the roads and the indispensable precautions he had to take, to remain at least four days on the road before reaching Hermosillo. This journey, which would have been very painful to any man accustomed to the ease and luxuries of life, was only a pleasure-trip for the worthy majordomo, a real Centaur, whose life was spent on horseback—who slept more frequently in the open air than under a roof, and whose powerful constitution rendered him insensible to the annoyances inseparable from a journey made under such conditions.

Jose Paredes rode along jauntily on his horse, at one moment carelessly smoking a husk cigarette, at another humming a *jarabe* or a *seguedilla*, while keeping his eye and ear on the watch, and his finger prudently laid on the trigger of his gun, which was placed across his saddle-bow. His second day's riding was drawing to a close.

The sun was rapidly declining on the horizon: a rather powerful wind blew in gusts, raising clouds of dust, which blinded the horseman and formed a thick fog round him, in the midst of which he almost entirely disappeared. Although, as we have said, the day was drawing to a close, the heat was stifling, the sky had assumed a livid appearance; yellow clouds gradually collected in the horizon and were rapidly brought up by the wind. All presaged one of those storms which it is only possible to witness in these regions—veritable cataclysms which rend and uproot the largest trees, force streams from their beds, and overthrow the soil, as if the earth were struggling wildly beneath the grasp of those horrible convulsions of Nature which completely change within a few hours the aspect of the country over which they have swept with the fury of the African simoom.

"Hum!" Jose Paredes muttered to himself, "if I am not greatly mistaken, within an hour we shall have one of the most tremendous *cordonazos* that has been seen for some time. That will be most agreeable for me, and my position will not fail to be most amusing. Confound the tempest! Why could not it have waited for another eight-and-forty hours?"

The majordomo, however, lost no time in vain lamentation. Jose Paredes was a resolute man, long accustomed only to reckon on his courage, strength, and energy, to get him out of difficult situations; he therefore carefully wrapped himself in his zarape, pulled his hat down over his forehead, and, bending over his horse's neck, dug his spurs, while crying sharply one word: "Santiago!" a cry employed in this country to excite horses. The noble animal, astonished that its master should deem it necessary to employ spurs to give it ardour, gave a snort of passion, and started at a headlong pace.

At length Paredes uttered a cry of joy, for he had reached the end of the ravine, and before him extended a vast plain, bordered by tall mountains in the horizon.



These mountains the majordomo wanted to reach, for there alone had he a chance of safety. Although his position had greatly improved after leaving the ravine, it was still extremely difficult, if the storm were to burst before he had succeeded in crossing the plains, which afforded him no shelter to brave the tornado. Hence the traveller, after exploring the neighbourhood with a rapid glance, and assuring himself that he had no hope of escaping the tempest, and the barren sandy plain which was only traversed by a few streams, repeated his cry of "Santiago," and set out on his mad ride once more.

All at once a vivid flash broke through the clouds followed by a tremendous thunder-clap. The horse gave a start of terror, but quickly checked by its rider, started again through the torrents of rain which were beginning to fall. Night had suddenly set in; the sun, veiled by the clouds, had become invisible, and it was in condemned obscurity that the majordomo was compelled to attempt the supreme efforts on which life or death depended.

The tempest had changed into a fearful hurricane, and raged with extreme fury. The unchained winds whistled violently, dashing the rain, and upraising masses of mud, which flew along the ground.

An ill-omened swashing made the unhappy traveller, who was surprised by the tornado, understand that the streams were beginning to overflow and inundate the plain. By the vivid flashes which uninterruptedly followed each other, the majordomo could see all around large grey pools of water, which constantly widened, and enclosed him in an incessantly contracting circle; distant sounds borne by the breeze heightened his apprehensions.

Suddenly the majordomo uttered a cry of terror and anger, drew himself up, and pulled the bridle with such strength that the horse stopped short on his trembling legs. He fancied he had heard the distant sound of a bell. When an inundation comes the hacenderos have all their bells rung, in order to warn straggling travellers and tell them of a place of refuge. The majordomo listened; in a few seconds a sound, faint as a sigh, reached the ear. The practised hunter was not mistaken; it was really the expiring sound of a bell.

In the darkness he had left his track; he was lost in the midst of an entirely submerged country without the chance of help. In spite of his indomitable bravery the majordomo felt an internal horror; an icy perspiration stood on his forehead, and he shook all over. At this supreme moment the man had but one terrible thought that he would bear with him to the tomb the fortune entrusted to him by his master, and on which the future of his children perhaps depended. Paredes felt burning tears start in his eyes, and a choking sob from his bosom. But this prostration only lasted a short time. Ashamed of the passing despondency to which he had yielded, the majordomo resolved to sustain the insensate struggle till he drew his last breath.

Rendered stronger by his energetic resolution, the majordomo passed the back of his hand over his eyes, addressed to heaven a mental prayer, and, instead of going on, he waited for a flash by which he could examine his position, and decide the new course he had to take. He had not to wait long; almost immediately a flash shot athwart the sky. Paredes uttered a cry of joy and surprise: he had seen, a few paces from him on his right, a rather tall hill, on the top of which he fancied he noticed a horseman.

With that coolness which powerful men alone possess in critical circumstances, the majordomo, although he felt that the water was rapidly encircling him, and was almost up to his horse's girths, would not leave anything to chance. Fearing he had been deceived by one of those optical illusions so frequent when the senses are over-excited, he resolved to wait for a second flash. All at once, at the moment when the desired flash lit up the darkness, a voice, that overpowered the roar of the tempest, reached his ear—



"Courage! keep straight on," he heard.

The majordomo uttered a cry of delight which resembled a yell; and, lifting his horse with his bridle and knees, he dashed towards the hill, pursued by the seething waters which were powerless to arrest him; and, after an ascent that lasted scarce ten minutes, he fell fainting into the arms of the man whose summons had saved him.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A CONVERSATION BY NIGHT.

THE majordomo's fainting fit, caused rather by the moral struggle he had sustained than by physical fatigue, was not of any duration. He threw off the furs and blankets laid over him to protect him, and looked curiously around him. The tempest was still raging, but it had lost a great deal of its violence. A few yards from its master his horse was quietly grazing; it was eating the young tree-shoots, and the tall close grass that covered the ground like a thick carpet of verdure. Another horse was browsing close by.

"Good!" Paredes muttered to himself, "my saviour has not gone away; I hope he is not far off, and that I shall see him soon."

The Mexican had scarce ended his soliloquy, ere a shadow stood out in the gloom, and the man of whom he was speaking appeared.

"Ah, ah!" he said, gaily, "you are all right again, I see."

"Thanks," the majordomo cordially answered. "I fancy I must have looked very pitiable. Is it not disgraceful for a strong man to faint like a child?"

"Not the least in the world, *companionero*," the other said, frankly. "Accident decreed that I should be for a long time the involuntary witness of the contest you waged. I declare that you are a tough combatant."

This answer completely broke the ice.

"I confess," Paredes remarked, as he offered his hand to his new friend, "that for a moment I believed myself lost, and had it not been for you I should have been so."

"Nonsense," the other replied, as he pressed the hand offered him. "You owe me nothing, for, by Jove! you saved yourself all alone. But let us not dwell upon this point any longer. I fancy it would be best for us to try and get out of it as quickly as possible."

"That is my opinion, too; but, unluckily, the means at our disposal are very limited."

"Perhaps so; at any rate, with your consent, we will hold a council."

"The best thing we can do; day will not break for hours."

"We have time before us, in that case."

During this short conversation the storm had entirely ceased.

"Before all," the majordomo said, "let us light a fire; now that the tempest has ceased, the wild beasts will seek the shelter of this hill."

"Excellent! argued; I see that you are a hunter."



"I was one for some time," Paredes replied, with a sigh; "but now it is all over."

"I pity you sincerely," the stranger said, with an accent of sincerity.

"The finest years of my life were those I spent in the desert."

While conversing thus the two men had dug a hole with their machetes at the foot of an enormous larch tree to act as a hearth. In this hole they piled up all the resinous wood they were able to procure, lit it with some gunpowder rolled up in leaves, and in a few minutes a long jet of flame sprang up and joyously ascended to the sky, while the wood crackled and emitted millions of sparks. Fire has an immense influence upon the human mind; among other benefits, it has the faculty of restoring joy and hope; and while warming a man with its reviving heat, it often makes him forget perils incurred and fatigues endured.

"*Viva Dios!*" said the majordomo, shaking himself, "I am now quite a different man. What a fine thing a fire is! Suppose we make use of it, comrade?"

"Do so, pray," the stranger replied, with a laugh; "but in what way?"

"Oh, that is very easy; you shall see. Are you not hungry?"

"*Carai*, it is fourteen hours since I have eaten; but I have no provisions."

The majordomo fetched the alforjas which were fastened to his saddle.

"There!" he said, displaying his provisions with some degree of complacency.

The provisions which caused such delight to the two men would have made our European goodwives smile with pity. They consisted of some *tasajo*, *cicuia*, a lump of goat's cheese, and a few maize tortillas; but the majordomo produced a leather bottle, full of excellent mezcal, which had the effect of restoring to the two adventurers all their merry carelessness.

"Now let us hold a council, if you are agreeable," the stranger said, as he inhaled an enormous mouthful of smoke.

"As you are my senior on this territory," the majordomo remarked, "you have the first right to speak."

"Very good: we are surrounded by water, and though the tempest has ceased, the streams will not return to their bed for several hours."

"That is true," the majordomo said: "and yet we must get away from here."

"That is the question. To do so we can only employ two means."

"Yes, we must either wait till the ground is dry, or at sunrise we can mount our horses and bravely swim off."

"You forget another way which is still at our service."

"I do not think so."

"We can get into a canoe, and tow our horses after us, which will tire them less than carrying us."

"Your opinion is certainly good, and I approve of it with all my heart; unluckily we want one very important thing to carry it out, and that is the canoe."

"While you were in a faint," the stranger continued, with a smile, "I explored our domain. You know that in this country, when the rainy season arrives, the inhabitants are accustomed to hide canoes in bushes, and even in trees."

"That is true; have you found a canoe?"

"Yes; and hidden behind the very tree against which you are leaning."

"Heaven be praised! In that case we run no risk; but is the canoe in good condition?"

"I have assured myself of that fact, and even found two pairs of new paddles."

"In that case we will start at sunrise, if that suits you."

"Excellently; though I am not in such a hurry as you appear to be."

"Shall we employ the few hours left us in having a sleep?"

"Sleep if you like, but as I am not at all fatigued I shall watch."



"I accept your proposal as frankly as you make it. Yet, with your permission, I will not close my eyes till I have become better acquainted with you."

"Oh, when travelling, what value can such formalities possess?"

"In a few hours we shall part, it is true, perhaps never to meet again; but perhaps, at some distant period, we may require each other's assistance; now, how could I summon you if I did not know your name?"

"You're right, comrade; as for me, I am only a poor devil of a hunter, wood-ranger, or trapper, which you please, and my companions call me Stronghand."

"*Viva Dios*, caballero! you are well named, as I can declare; your reputation has already reached me, and I am delighted at the chance that has brought us together."

"I thank you," the hunter replied, with a bow.

"As for me," the Mexican continued, "my name is Jose Paredes."

"What!" Stronghand said, "you are majordomo at the Hacienda del Toro?"

"Yes, what do you find surprising in that?"

"The man whom his master sent two days ago to receive cash for heavy bills?"

"How do you know that?" Paredes exclaimed.

"What matter, so long as I know it?" the hunter replied. "Believe me our meeting is truly providential."

"That is strange," Paredes muttered; "how is it possible that a secret which my master confided to me alone should be in your possession?"

"A secret known to three persons," said the hunter, "is not a secret."

"But that third person to whom you refer has no right to divulge it."

"How do you know? I think you said you had heard speak of me before we met?"

"That is true, senor."

"What terms did the persons who spoke of me employ?"

"They represented you to me as a man of unspotted loyalty."

"Good! Does that report satisfy you—have you confidence in me?"

"Yes; for I am convinced that you are an honest man."

"I hope that your opinion of me will not alter. I will soon prove to you that it is fortunate for you and the marquis that we have met, for I was looking for you."

"Looking for me! I do not understand you."

"You do not require to understand me; but everything will be explained. You are devoted to your master?"

"My family have lived on the estate for two hundred years, and I am devoted to my master body and soul."

"That is the way to answer; however, I knew it already, and only desired that your lips should confirm what I have been told."

"My master has no secrets from me."

"I know that also. Well, now, listen to me attentively, Senor Paredes. Your master is at this moment in danger of being utterly ruined. He is the plaything of villains who have sworn to destroy him. The sum you are going to fetch they intend to take from you."

"Are you certain of what you assert?" the majordomo exclaimed.

"I know all; the men from whom I obtained your secret, who little expected that I was listening to them, at the same time revealed to me the means they intended to employ in assassinating you."

"Why, that is infamous."

"I am completely of your opinion, and that is why I wish to foil the plots of these villains."

"But what interest induces you to act thus?" the majordomo asked

"That question I cannot answer. You must for the present lay aside all curiosity. You must place entire confidence in me. Does this suit you?"



There was a lengthened silence. The majordomo was reflecting.

"Listen, Stronghand," at length said Paredes, "all that you have told me appears extraordinary, and I confess that at once; but there is such frankness in your voice, and your reputation is so well established among your brethren, the woodrangers, who all proclaim your loyalty, that I do not hesitate to confide in you. I will do what you ask of me—resign my will entirely; you may regard me as a thing belonging entirely to you. Come, go, act as you think proper, and I will obey."

"Yes, my worthy friend, that pleases me. Believe the word of an honest man. If anything can add to the confidence you have placed in me I swear to you, by all that is most sacred in the world, that no one is more interested than I am in the Marquis de Moguer."

"We shall still start at sunrise, eh?"

"Yes; but not to Hermosillo. Before going to that town, we must take certain precautions. We have to deal with crafty bandits. They are on our track, and we must cheat them."

"Good, good! I will call to mind my old hunter's profession."

"Remember, above all, the prairie proverb, 'The trees have eyes and the leaves ears.'"

"But if we do not go to Hermosillo, where are we going?"

"To-morrow, when it is daylight," the hunter answered, "when the bright sunbeams permit me to convince myself that no one can hear us, I will tell you. For the present, sleep."

And, as if to avoid fresh questioning, the hunter wrapped himself in his zarape, leant his back against the larch-tree, stretched out his legs to the fire, and closed his eyes. The majordomo himself was soon fast asleep.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE REAL DE MINAS.

SONORA is the richest mining country in the world. We assured ourselves by official data that six hundred bars of silver and sixty bars of gold, worth together a million of piastres, were brought to the mint of Hermosillo in 1839.

No country in the world possesses auriferous strata so rich and so extensive. The metal is found in alluvial soil in ravines after rain, and always on the surface or at a depth of a few feet. In the north of the province of Arispe, the placers of Quitoal and Sonoitac, which were found again in 1836, and to which we shall soon have to allude more specially, produced for three years two hundred ounces of gold per day, that is to say, reducing it to our money, the large sum of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

The gold-seekers restrict themselves to turning up the soil with a pointed stick, and only collect the nuggets that are visible; but if the streams were diverted from their course, and large washings undertaken, the profits would be far more considerable. It is not rare to find nuggets weighing several pounds. We saw at Arispe,



in the hands of a miner, one that was worth nine thousand piastres, or about eighteen hundred pounds.

Most of the buildings of the pueblos, or missions of Sonora, serve as the gathering place of the nomadic workmen and traders. The place where the workmen assemble takes the name of Real de Minas or Mineral; and if the mine promises to be productive for any length of time the population definitively settles round it. Many important towns of Mexico had no other origin.

We will temporarily leave Stronghand and José Paredes at the top of the hill, where they found a shelter from the inundation, and lead the reader to the Real de Minas of Quitoval.

It was evening. The streets and plazas of the pueblo were crowded with individuals of every description: Yaquis Indians, hunters, miners, gambusinos, monks, and adventurers, who composed the motley population of the Mineral, mounted and foot, incessantly jostled each other, and bowed, spoke, laughed, or quarrelled. Some were returning from the placer, where they had been at work all day; others were leaving their houses to enjoy the evening breeze; others, and they were the larger number, were entering the drink-shops, through whose doors could be heard the songs of the toppers, and the shrill, inharmonious tinkling jarabes and vihuelas.

One of these *tendajos* seemed to have the privilege of attracting a greater number of customers than all the rival establishments. After passing through a low door and descending two steps of unequal height, the visitor found himself in a species of hideous den, resembling at once a cellar and a shed. A hot, heavy vapour, impregnated with alcoholic fumes and mephitic exhalations, escaped through the door of this den, as from the mouth of Hades, and painfully affected mouth and eyes, before the latter became accustomed to the close, obscure aspect of the place, and were enabled to pierce the thick curtain of vapour, which was constantly drawn from one side to the other by the movements of the customers. They perceived, by the dubious light of a few candles scattered here and there, a large and lofty room, whose once whitewashed walls had become black at the lower part by the constant friction of heads, backs, and shoulders, to which they served as a support.

Facing the door was a *daïs*, raised about a foot above the ground; this *daïs* occupied the entire width of the room, and was divided into two parts; that on the right contained a table forming a bar, behind which stood a tall, active fellow, with false look and ill-tempered face, the master of the *tendajo*. The left hand portion of the *daïs* was occupied by the musicians.

On each side of the room, the centre of which remained free for the dancers, ran rickety, badly-made, dirty tables, occupied at this moment by a crowd of customers, some seated on benches, others standing, laughing, talking, shouting, quarrelling; drinking mezcal, refino, pulque, or infusion of tamarinds, or else staking at *monté* the gold earned during the day at the mine. A few women, creatures without a name, whose features were sodden with debauchery, and eyes deep sunk with drinking, were mingled with the crowd.

Nothing can describe the hideous aspect of this infamous Pandemonium, the refuge of all the vices of the province.

At the moment when we invite the reader to enter this drinking-shop the room was full of drinkers and dancers, and the whole mob laughed and yelled. On the left, near the door, a man, wrapped up in a thick cloak, with one end of which he completely concealed his features, was sitting motionless at a separate table, looking absently and carelessly at the dancers. When a new-comer entered the *tendajo* this man looked towards the door, and then turned his head away with an air of all-humour when he perceived that the new-comer was not the person that he had



been expecting. Still no one paid, or seemed to pay, any attention to him—all were too much absorbed in their own occupations.

All at once a formidable disturbance broke out at one end of the room; a table was upset by a vigorous blow; oaths crossed each other in the air, and knives were drawn from boots; musicians and dancers stopped short, and a circle was formed round two men who, with frowning brows, eyes sparkling with intoxication and passion, a zarapé rolled as a buckler round the left arm, and a navaja in their right hand, were preparing, according to all appearance, to attack each other vigorously. The tendajero, or master of the house, then proved himself equal to his position; he leaped like a jaguar over the counter behind which he had hitherto stood engaged in watching his waiters and serving customers; he closed the front door, against which he leant his powerful shoulders, in order to prevent any customer bolting without payment of his score.

The two men were standing looking in each other's eyes, ready for attack or defence. All at once the mysterious sleeper appeared to wake with a start, as if surprised by the voice of one of the adversaries, took a hasty glance at the combatants, and then darted between them.

"What is the matter?" he asked, in a firm voice.

"This man," one of them answered, "has lost three ounces at monté."

"Well?" the stranger interjected.

"He refuses to pay me," the gambler continued, "because he declares that the cards were packed. Now, I am known to be a caballero."

At this affirmation, which was slightly erroneous, a smile of singular meaning curled the stranger's lip; but he continued—

"It is true that you are a caballero, and I would affirm it were it necessary; but the most honest man is subject to deceive himself. Hence, instead of fighting with this caballero, whose honour and loyalty cannot be doubted, prove to him that you recognise your error by paying him the three ounces, and he will apologise."

"Certainly, I am convinced that this caballero is a man of honour; I am ready to proclaim it anywhere," said the individual who had not yet spoken.

The stranger then turned to the man whose friend he had made himself.

"Well, caballero," he said, "what do you think of this apology?"

The man thus addressed hesitated for a moment; a combat was evidently going on in his mind; his furious glances seemed to challenge the company, and had he perceived on the face of one of the spectators an expression of contempt, however fugitive it might have been, he would doubtless have immediately picked another quarrel. But all the persons who surrounded him were cold and indifferent.

"Pardon me an involuntary error, at which I am truly confused," he said, with a courteous bow; "here is your money."

The other took the ounces without pressing, thrust them away in his capacious pockets.

"Now, Master Kidd," the stranger continued, "I suppose that all your business here is settled, so with your permission we will withdraw."

"As you please," Kidd answered, carelessly.

The groups had broken up, the crowd had dispersed, musicians and dancers had returned to their places, and the two men could consequently leave without attracting attention. The stranger, when he reached the purer atmosphere of the street, took several deep inspirations.

"*Cuerpo de Cristo!* Master Kidd," he then said, in a tone of ill-humour, "you are, it must be confessed, a singular fellow; you compel me to come and hunt you up at this filthy den, where I consented to meet you, and, instead of watching for my arrival, you leave me among the most perfect collection of bandits I ever saw."

"Excess of zeal, captain, so you must not be angry with me for that," the bandit



answered. "In order to be punctual, I had been for nearly four hours at worthy Senor Cospeto's. Not knowing how to spend my time, I played at cards. You know what monté is; once I have the cards in my hand I forget everything."

"I am willing to believe you. Still, I pledge you my word that if you dupe me in the affair you will repent it. You know me, I think, Master Kidd?"

"Yes, Captain Don Marcos de Niza, and I suppose that you know me too?"

The captain gave him a suspicious glance.

"It is well," he said, as he rapped at the door; "come in, this is my house; I prefer treating with you here."

"As you please," the bandit said, and followed the captain into his house.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE BARGAIN.

CAPTAIN DON MARCOS DE NIZA, whom we left commanding the post of San Miguel, had been a few days previously summoned to the political and military government of the Mineral of Quitoval. The fact was that during the last few days certain events had occurred which demanded energetic action on the part of the president. All at once, at a moment when no discontent was supposed to exist among the Indians, the latter revolted, and had, without any declaration of war, invaded the Mexican territory. This revolt suddenly assumed serious proportions, and had become the more formidable within a short time, because the revolvers were the Comanches, Apaches, and Axuas.

The general commanding Sonora and Cinaloa, the two states most exposed to the depredations of the Indians, saw that he must oppose to the Indians a man who had acquired great experience as to their way of fighting and the tricks they employ. Only one officer fulfilled these conditions, and that officer was Captain de Niza; he, therefore, received orders to quit the post of San Miguel after dismantling it, and proceed immediately to the Mineral of Quitoval.

Unfortunately, the general commanding the provinces had but a very limited military force at his disposal; scarce amounting to six hundred infantry and two hundred cavalry, without field artillery. Hence, in spite of his lively desire to give the captain a respectable force, as he was obliged to scatter his troops along the frontier of the two states, he found it impossible to send to Quitoval more than one hundred infantry and fifty cavalry.

Still, as he expected to be attacked at any moment by an army of ten or fifteen thousand veteran Indians, amply supplied with firearms, and who, through being accustomed to fight with Spaniards, could not be easily terrified, he had to augment the number of his soldiers, so as to have men enough to line the entrenchments he had thrown up round the town. He had but one means by which to obtain this result, and he employed it.

It was very simple. It consisted in enlisting, for a certain bounty, as many as he could of the adventurers who always swarm on the borders. The sum offered



the captain was two ounces per man, one payable on enlistment, the other at the termination of the campaign. This offer, seductive though it was, did not produce all the effect the captain expected from it. The adventurers responded but feebly to the appeal made to them. These men, in whose hearts patriotic love does not exist, and who only care for pillage, saw in the insurrection of the Indians a source of disorder, and, consequently, of rapine.

Thirty or forty adventurers, however, responded to the call; and these rough men, who were impatient at the yoke of discipline, were rather an embarrassment than an assistance to the captain; still as, take them altogether, they were sturdy fellows, and thoroughly acquainted with Indian warfare, he attached them to his cavalry, which was thus raised to a strength of one hundred men. Don Marcos thus found himself at the head of two hundred and fifty infantry and one hundred horse.

We are aware that this number of men defending a town will produce a smile of pity among European readers, who are accustomed to see masses of three hundred thousand men. But all is relative in this world. In America, where the population is comparatively small, great things have often been decided at the bayonet's point by armies whose relative strength did not exceed that of one of our regiments. In the last battle fought between the Texans and Mexicans—a battle which decided the independence of Texas, the two armies together did not amount to six thousand men, six hundred and fifty on one side, and over five thousand on the other, and yet the collision was terrible, and victory obstinately disputed.

One night, when the captain returned home after his usual visit to the pueblo to assure himself that all was in order, a ragged lepero, more than half-intoxicated with mezcal and pulque, handed him with an infinitude of bows a dirty slip of paper folded up in the shape of a letter.

After throwing his cap and sword on a table, the captain opened the letter.

This letter came from Kidd. The captain had been long acquainted with the bandit, and knew certain peculiar facts about him which would have been most disagreeable to the bandit, had the latter suspected that the captain was initiated in the secrets of his vagabond life. Hence Don Marcos fancied he had no right to neglect the overtures the other was pleased to make; while keeping on his guard and determined to punish him severely if he deceived him. The captain, therefore, proceeded without hesitation to the place where the adventurer appointed to meet him. He had waited for him for several hours with exemplary patience, and would probably have waited longer still, had not chance suddenly brought them face to face.

When the two men had entered the house, and the door closed after them, Don Marcos de Niza led the bandit into a room, the door of which he carefully closed. The captain pointed to a chair, sat down at a table, laid a brace of pistols ostentatiously within his reach, and said—

"Now I am ready to hear you."

"*Cara!*" said the bandit; "but the point is am I disposed to speak?"

"And why not, pray, my excellent friend?"

"Hang it, captain," he said, as he pointed to the pistols, "there are two play-things not at all adapted to set my tongue wagging."

"Master Kidd," said Don Marcos, in a stern voice, "I like a distinct understanding; let us, therefore, before anything establish our relative positions. You have led a very agitated life, Master Kidd; your vagabond humour, your mad desire to appropriate certain things to which you have a very dubious claim have led you into a few mistakes."

The bandit shook his head in denial.

"I will not dwell," the captain continued, mockingly, "on a subject which must make your modesty greatly suffer. I am commandant of this pueblo, and in that capacity compelled to watch over its external safety as well as its internal tranquillity."

"Yes, captain," the bandit answered, somewhat reassured.



"Very good; you wrote me this letter, appointing a meeting, and offering to sell certain most important information. Another man might have treated you in the Indian fashion. After having you arrested, he would have ordered a cord to be fastened round your temples. I have preferred dealing with you as an honest man."

The bandit breathed again.

"Still, as you are one of those persons with whom it is advisable to take precautions, I retain not only the right, but also the means of blowing out your brains if you have the slightest intention of deceiving me."

"Oh, captain, what an idea! Blow out my brains!" cried the bandit.

"Do you fancy, my dear senor," the captain continued, still sarcastically, "that your friends will pity you greatly if such a misfortune happened to you?"

"Hum! to tell you the truth, I do not exactly know," the adventurer answered, with an attempt to jest; "people are so unkind. But you accept my bargain?"

"You sell; I buy; it is your place to make your conditions; and, if they are not exorbitant—if, in a word, they seem to me fair, I will accept them."

"*Caria!* captain; it is a delicate question, for I am an honest man."

"That is allowed," interrupted Don Marcos. "Name your price."

"Fifty ounces; would that be too much?" the bandit ventured.

"Certainly not, if the thing be worth it."

"Oh, you shall judge for yourself," he remarked, rubbing his hands.

"I ask nothing better but to buy, and to prove to you that I have no intention of cheating you," he added.

And the captain made two piles each of twenty-five ounces, exactly between the pistols. At the sight of the gold the bandit's eyes sparkled.

"Captain," he exclaimed, "there is a pleasure in treating with you. I will remember it."

"I ask nothing better, Master Kidd. Now speak, I am listening."

"Oh, I have not much to say; but you will judge whether it is important."

"Go on; I am all ears."

"In two words, this is the matter: the Indians have not elected a chief, but an emperor!"

"Is he young?" asked the captain, coolly.

"He is sixty; but as active as if he were only twenty."

"Very good; proceed."

"Is that important?"

"Very important. But not worth fifty ounces for all that."

"The Yaquis, Mayos, and Seris have allowed themselves to be seduced, and have entered the Confederation. They have taken up again their old plans of 1827—"

"Go on," said the captain.

"The first expedition is the capture of the Real de Minas."

"I am aware of it."

"Yes; but do you know, captain, that the Indians have spies even among the garrison; and that the Indians intend to surprise you within the next two days?"

"Who gave you this information?"

"What use my telling you, captain," the bandit answered, "if the information is correct?"

"Do you know the men who have entered into negotiation with the enemy?"

"Judge for yourself. But, suppose I were to tell you their names, what would happen?"

"*Viva Dios!*" said the captain, sharply. "I should shoot them like the miserable dogs they are."



"Well; suppose you shoot ten men?"

"Twenty, if necessary."

"Say twenty, it is of no consequence to me; but those who remain will sell you to the Indians, so that the only result will be precipitating the evil."

"Ah, ah!" the commandant said. "And what would you do?"

"I would leave the scamps at liberty to prepare their treachery, while carefully watching them; and when the moment for attack arrived I would have them quietly arrested."

The captain appeared to reflect for a moment, and then said: "The plan you recommend seems to me good, and for the present I see no inconvenience in carrying it out. Give me the names of the traitors?"

Kidd mentioned a dozen names, which the captain wrote down after him.

"Now," Don Marcos continued, "there are your fifty ounces, and I shall give as many each time you bring me information as valuable as that of to-day. I pay you dearly, so it is your interest to serve me faithfully; but remember that if you deceive me, the punishment, I warn you, will be terrible."

The adventurer bounded on the money like a wild beast on a prey it has long coveted, concealed it with marvellous dexterity in his wide pockets, and said to the captain, with a bow: "Senor Don Marcos, I have always thought that in this world gold was the sovereign master, and that it alone had the right to command."

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE UNITED INDIANS.

WE will now return to Stronghand and Jose Paredes, whom we have left too long at the top of the hill. The night passed without any incident, the majordomo sleeping like a man overcome by fatigue; as for the hunter, he did not close his eyes once. The sun had risen for a long time; it was nearly nine o'clock, but the hunter, forgetting apparently what he had said to his comrade, did not dream of departure.

"Caramba!" said the majordomo suddenly awakening; "I fancy I have forgotten myself; it must be very late."

"Ten o'clock," the hunter answered, with a smile.

"Hum!" Paredes replied, half-laughing, half-vexed; "I know not whether I ought to complain or thank you for this weakness, for we have lost precious time."

"Not at all; see, the water has disappeared; the ground is growing firm again, and when the great heat of the day is past we will mount our horses."

"That is true, and you are right, comrade," said the majordomo. "Well, as it is so," he added, with a laugh, "suppose we breakfast, for that will enable us to kill some time."

"Very good," the hunter replied, good humouredly.

They breakfasted as they had supped on the previous night. When the hour for starting at length arrived they saddled their horses and led them down the hill; for



the ascent which they had escalated so actively by night, under the impulse of the pressing danger that threatened them, now proved extremely steep, abrupt, and difficult. When they mounted Stronghand said: "My friend, I am going to take you to an *atepetl* of the red-skins. Do you consider that disagreeable?"

"Not personally, but I will ask what advantage my master can derive from it?"

"That question I am unable to answer at the moment."

"Let us go, then. One word, however, first. Are the redskins to whom we are proceeding a long distance off?"

"You and I," the hunter continued, "who are true guides, and who have also the advantage of being well mounted, will reach the village at three or four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. You must have heard of the village spoken of, if chance has never led your footsteps thither?"

"Why so?"

"Because it is only a dozen leagues at the most from the Hacienda del Toro."

"Wait a minute," the majordomo said, "you are right, I have never been to that village, it is true, but I have often heard it spoken of. Is not one of the chiefs a white man?"

"So people say," answered the hunter.

"Is it not strange," the majordomo continued, "that a white man should consent to abandon entirely the society of his fellows to live with savages?"

Receiving no answer, he followed his guide. The day passed without any occurrences to interrupt the monotony of their ride, which they continued with great speed till night, only stopping from time to time to shoot a few birds for supper. Galloping, talking, and smoking, they at length reached the spot where they intended to bivouac. The road they had followed in no way resembled the one the majordomo had taken on leaving the hacienda, although they were returning in the direction of Arispe. They galloped on as the bird flies, crossing mountains and swimming rivers whenever they came to them, without losing time in seeking a ford.

This mode of travelling, generally adopted by the woodrangers of the savannah, where the only roads are tracks made by the wild beasts, would not be possible in civilised countries, where there are so many towns and villages; but in Mexico, especially on the Indian border, towns are excessively rare. At night they camped in a wood beyond the Hacienda del Toro, which building they saw rising gloomy and tranquil, like an eagle's nest on the top of its rock, and they passed close to it during the afternoon.

The country now assumed a wilder and more abrupt aspect; the grass was thicker, the trees were larger, older, and closer together. It was evident that the travellers were at the extreme limit of civilisation, and would soon find themselves in the red territory, although nominally, at least on the maps, this territory figured among the possessions of the Mexican Confederation.

The two men, after lighting their watch-fire, supped with good appetite, rolled themselves in their zarapes, and fell asleep, trusting to the instinct of their horses to warn them of the approach of any enemy, whether man or wild beast, that attempted to surprise them during their slumbers. But nothing disturbed them; the night was quiet. At sunrise they awoke, mounted, and continued their journey.

"When we have crossed that hill," said the hunter, "we shall see the village a short distance ahead of us, picturesquely grouped on the side of another hill, and running into the plain, where the last houses are built on the banks of a pretty little stream, whose white and limpid waters serve as a natural rampart."

"Tell me, comrade, what do you think of the reception that will be offered us?"

"The Indians are hospitable."

"I do not doubt it. Unluckily, I have no claims to their kindness. I know that they are very suspicious, and never like to see white men enter their villages."



"That depends on the way in which white men try to enter them."

"There is another reason. It is said that the Papazos Indians are excited, and on the point of revolting."

"They rose in insurrection some days ago," Stronghand coolly answered.

"What?" the majordomo exclaimed, "and are you leading me to them?"

"Why not?"

"Because we shall be massacred, that's all."

"You are mad," said the hunter.

"I am mad—I am mad!" Paredes repeated, shaking his head very dubiously; "it pleases you to say that."

"Viva Dios! do you fancy me capable of leading you into a snare?"

"No; on my honour that is not my thought; but you may be mistaken."

"I am certain of what I assert. You will have an honourable reception."

"Honourable!" the majordomo remarked; "I am not very certain of that."

"You shall see. Woe to the man who dared to hurt a hair of your head while you are in my company."

"Who are you, to speak thus?"

"A hunter, nothing else; but I am a friend of the Papazos, and adopted son of one of their tribes."

"Well, be it so," the majordomo muttered.

"Besides," the hunter added, "any hesitation would now be useless, and perhaps dangerous."

"Why so?"

"Because the Indians have their scouts scattered through the woods and over the plain already; they saw and signalled our approach long ago, and if we attempted to turn back it would just appear suspicious."

"That makes the matter singular. You think we have been seen?"

"I will give you the proof," said the hunter.

The travellers had reached the foot of the hill, and were at this moment concealed by the tall grass that surrounded them. Stronghand stopped his horse, and imitated the cry of the mawkawis twice. Almost immediately the grass parted, an Indian bounded from a thick clump of trees with the lightness of an antelope, and stopped two yards from the hunter, on whom he fixed his black, intelligent eyes without saying a word.

This Indian was a man of twenty-three years of age at the most, whose exquisite proportions made him resemble a marble statue. The whole upper part of his body was naked; his unloosened hair hung in disorder over his shoulders; his clothing merely consisted of trousers sewn with horsehair, fastened round the loins by a belt of untanned leather, and tied at the ankles. A tomahawk and a scalping-knife—weapons which the Indians never lay aside—hung from his belt, and he leant with careless grace upon a long rifle of American manufacture. The hunter bowed, and after stretching out his arm, with the palm turned down and the fingers straight, said in a gentle voice, "Wah! the Waconlah protects me, since the first person I see on returning to my people is Sparrowhawk."

The young Indian bowed with native courtesy, and replied in a guttural voice, which, however, was very gentle: "For a long time the sachems have been informed of the coming of the Great Bear of their nation; they thought that only one chief was worthy saluting Stronghand on his return."

"I thank the sachems of my nation," the hunter said, with a meaning glance at the majordomo. "Will my son return to the village with us, or will he precede us?"

"Sparrowhawk will go ahead, in order that the guest of Stronghand, my father may be received with the honours due to a man who comes in the company of the Great Bear."



"My brother will act as becomes a chief. Stronghand will not detain him."

The young Indian bowed his head in assent, leapt backwards, and disappeared in the thicket whence he had emerged with such rapidity that, if the grass had not continued to undulate after his departure, his apparition would have seemed like a dream.

"We can now start again," the hunter said to the majordomo.

"Let us go," the latter answered, mechanically.

They crossed the plain, following a wild-beast track which, after numberless windings, reached a ford, and in about an hour they arrived at the bank of the river. Twelve Papazo Indians, dressed in their war-paint and mounted on magnificent horses, were standing motionless and in single file in front of the ford. So soon as they perceived the two travellers, they uttered loud shouts and dashed forward to meet them, firing their guns, brandishing their weapons, and waving their white female buffalo-robcs, which only the most renowned sachems of the nation have the right to wear. The two white men, on their side, spurred their horses, responding to the shouts of the Indians, and firing their guns. All at once, at a signal from one of the chiefs, all the horsemen stopped, and arranged themselves round the travellers, to act as an escort.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE ATEPETL.

MANY persons imagine that all Indians are alike, and that the man acquainted with the manners of one tribe knows them all. This is a serious error, which it is important to dissipate. Among the aborigines of America will be found as many differences in language, dialect, &c., as among the nations of the old continent, if not more. The number of dialects spoken by the Indians is infinite; the manners of one nation form a complete contrast with those of another living only a few leagues away; and any person who, after travelling for some time in the Far West, asserted that he was thoroughly acquainted with the character of the Indians and their mode of life would be quite deceived; and, more serious still, would deceive those whom he pretended to instruct.

The confederation of the Papazos was composed of several nations, combining both Indios Mansos and Indios Bravos. The latter, though harmless, and consequently nomadic, had, in the heart of unexplored forests or the gorges of the Sierra Madre, their winter villages—a collection of huts made of branches, and covered with mud, where, in the event of war, their squaws found refuge, and which served them, after an expedition, to hide the plunder they had made.

The Gilenos, whose powerful nation was composed of one hundred and eighteen distinct tribes, each of which had its private totem or standard, formed the principal branch of the confederation of the Papazos.

The Gilenos piously preserved the faith of their fathers, maintained their customs; among others that of never drinking spirituous liquors; and never permitted the Mexican Government to establish among them that system of annoyance and rapine



under which it mercilessly bows the other Indian mansos. The Gileno villages are distinguished from all the others by their singular construction, which admirably displays the character of this people.

Stronghand had pointed out to the majordomo clusters of storeyed houses, suspended as it were from the flank of the hill. But those houses were only built temporarily, and in case of an attack on the village would be immediately destroyed. The hill, doubtless in consequence of one of those natural convulsions so common in these regions, was separated into two parts by a quebrada of enormous depth, which served as the bed of an impetuous torrent. On either side of this quebrada the Indians had built an enormous construction, of pyramidal shape, upwards of two hundred feet in height. These two towers contained the lodgings of the inhabitants, their granaries and storehouses. More than eight hundred beings, men, women, and children, resided in these singular buildings, which were connected together at the top by a bridge of lianas, boldly thrown across the abyss. These towers could only be entered by a ladder, which was drawn up every night; for as a last and essential precaution, the doors were sixty feet from the ground, in order to guard against surprise.

The travellers were conducted with great ceremony by the chiefs, who had come to receive them at the entrance of the village, to the square, on one side of which stood the "ark of the first man"; on the other, the "great medicine-lodge, or council-hut." During the ride the majordomo fancied he saw among the crowd several individuals belonging to the white race, and mentioned it to his comrade.

"You are not mistaken," the latter replied; "several Mexicans reside in the village and trade with the Indians. Stay, here is a monk."

In fact, at this moment a stout, rubicund monk crossed the square, distributing blessings right and left.

"These worthy brothers," the hunter continued, "lead here a rather monastic life, but in spite of the trouble they take, they cannot succeed in making proselytes. The Comanches are too attached to their religion to accept another; still they have permitted them to build a chapel, a very poor and simple edifice, in which a few passing adventurers offer up their prayers; for the inhabitants of the village never set foot in it."

"I will go to it," said Paredes.

"And you will act rightly. However, I will do this justice to the four monks who, through a love of proselytism, have confined themselves to this forgotten nook, of stating that they bear an excellent reputation."

"But now that war is declared, what will become of these monks?"

"They will remain peacefully, without fearing insult or annoyance. However savage the Indians may be, they are not so savage, be assured, as to make the innocent suffer for the guilty."

"Forgive me, Stronghand, if I remark that I notice, with sorrow, in your mode of expressing yourself, a certain bitterness which seems to me unjust."

"I allow that I am wrong, my friend. When you know me better, you will be indulgent, I doubt not. But here we are at the square."

The plaza, which the travellers now reached, formed a parallelogram, and rose with a gentle ascent to the foot of the tower on the left of the village. Several streets opened into it, and the houses built on either side of it had an appearance of cleanliness and comfort which is but rarely found in Indian villages; and if this pueblo had been inhabited by white creoles, it would certainly have obtained the title of *ciudad*. In front of the council-lodge stood three men, whom it was easy to recognise as the principal chiefs of the village by their hats of racoon-skin, surrounded by a gold golilla, and the silver-mounted



cane, like that of our beadles, which they held in their right hand. These three chiefs, therefore, ostensibly held their power from the Mexican Government, but in reality the latter had only obeyed the feudal claims of the tribes assembled at this village, by conferring the authority on these men whom their countrymen had long previously recognised as chiefs.

The procession halted before the *alcaldes*, or, to use the Indian term, the *sachems*. The latter were men of a ripe age, with a haughty and imposing mien. The eldest of them, who stood in the centre, had in his look and the expression of his features something indescribably majestic. He appeared about sixty years of age; a long white beard fell in snowy flakes on his chest; his tall form, his broad forehead, his black eyes, and slightly aquiline nose, rendered him a very remarkable man.

This personage did not belong to the Indian race, as could be seen at the first glance; but in addition the fine, elegant, nervous type of the pure Spanish race could be noticed in him. The majordomo could not check a start of surprise at the sight of this man. He leant over to Stronghand and asked him in a low voice, choked by involuntary emotion, "Who is that man?"

"You can see," the hunter replied; "he is the *alcalde mayor*."

Paredes held his tongue, though his eyes were obstinately fixed on the man to whom the hunter had ironically given the title of *alcalde mayor*. A little to the rear of the chiefs a warrior was holding a totem of the tribe, representing a condor, the sacred bird of the Incas.

"Fathers of my nation," he said, "the Great Bear of our tribe has returned, bringing with him a pale-face, his friend."

"He is welcome," the three chiefs answered, unanimously, "as well as his friend, whoever he may be."

The hunter then advanced, and bowed respectfully to the *sachems*.

"Thanks for myself and friend," he said; "the journey we have made was long, and we are worn with fatigue."

The Indians were astonished to hear the hunter, a man of iron power, whose reputation for vigour was well established among them, speak of the fatigue he felt. But understanding that he had secret reasons for asking this, no one made a remark.

"Stronghand and his friend are free to proceed to the *calli*," one of the chiefs answered.

The two adventurers bowed respectfully, and, preceded by Sparrowhawk, passed through the crowd, which opened before them, and proceeded to the *calli* appointed for them. So soon as the travellers reached the *calli*, Sparrowhawk retired, after whispering a few words in the ear of the hunter. The latter replied by a sign of assent, and then turned to the majordomo.

"You are at home, comrade," he said to him; "use this house as you think proper. I have to see a person to whom I will introduce you presently. I will, therefore, leave you for the present."

And without waiting an answer, the hunter turned his horse, and started at a gallop.

"Hum!" the Mexican muttered, "all this is not clear"



## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE SPY.

**AFTER** installing the majordomo in the calli, Stronghand proceeded through the village, taking an apparently careless glance around, but in reality not letting anything escape his notice. The Indians whom the hunter met addressed him as an old acquaintance; the very women and children tried to attract his attention by their hearty bursts of laughter and their greetings of welcome. For all and for each the hunter had a pleasant remark, and thus satisfied the frequently indiscreet claims of those who pressed around him. Thus occupied, he went right through the village, and, on reaching the foot of the left-hand pyramid, dismounted, walked up to the ladder, and, after waving his hand to the Indians, hurried up it, and disappeared inside the pyramid.

This strange building, which was almost shapeless outside, was internally arranged with the utmost care and most perfect intelligence. The hunter, who was doubtless anxious to reach his destination, only took a hurried glance at the rooms he passed through; he went up an internal staircase, and soon reached the top of the pyramid. Sparrowhawk was standing motionless before a cougar's skin hung up in lieu of a door, and on seeing the hunter he bowed courteously.

"My father has not delayed," he said, with a good-tempered smile.

"Has the council begun yet?" Stronghand asked.

"For four suns the elders of the nation have remained without taking rest round the council-fire."

"Cannot I speak to the great sachem for a moment?" the hunter asked.

"I cannot give my father any information on that point."

"Good!" the hunter continued; "has Sparrowhawk no instructions?"

Without replying Sparrowhawk raised the curtain and allowed the hunter to pass into the council-hall.

In a large room, which was entirely destitute of furniture—unless that name can be given to dried buffalo-skulls employed as seats—some twenty persons were gravely seated in a circle, smoking a calumet silently, whose mouthpiece constantly passed from hand to hand. In the centre of the circle was a golden brasier, in which burned the sacred fire of Montezama, which must never go out.

The presence of this fire in the room, which was generally kept in a subterranean vault, inaccessible to the sight of the common herd, and which is only shown to the people on grand occasions, proved the gravity of the matters the council had to discuss.

Thunderbolt, the old man whose portrait we have drawn, presided over the assembly. On the entrance of Stronghand all the warriors rose, turned to him, and, after bowing gracefully, invited him to take a seat among them. The hunter, flattered in his heart by the honour done him, bowed gravely to the members of the council, and seated himself on the right of Thunderbolt, after handing his weapons to Sparrowhawk. There was a rather long silence, during



which the hunter smoked the calumet which had been eagerly offered him. At length Thunderbolt began speaking.

"My son could not arrive at a better moment," he said, addressing Stronghand; "his return was eagerly desired. He has, without doubt, some news."

"I have been among the Gachupinos. I have entered their towns, I have seen their pueblos, presidios, and posts; like ourselves, they are preparing for war; they understand the extent of the danger which threatens them."

"The news is not very explicit; we hoped that Stronghand would give us more serious information," Thunderbolt remarked.

"The white men have a proverb," said the young man, "whose justice I specially recognise at this moment, and this is, 'Words are silver, but silence is gold.'"

"Which means?" Thunderbolt continued, eagerly.

"The most formidable weapon of the white man is treachery," the hunter continued, not appearing to heed the interruption; "they have even conquered by treachery the red-skins, whom they did not dare meet face to face."

"We cannot act otherwise than we are doing. Yes, and that is why the whites are cleverer than we. So soon as war is declared, they appoint a commission, composed of three members, or five at the most, who have to draw up the plan of the campaign. Why do we not do the same?"

After bowing to the audience the hunter sat down again, and seemed to be plunged into deep thought. One of the instinctive qualities of the Indians is good sense. Thunderbolt questioned the members of the council by a glance; all replied by an affirmative shake of their heads.

"Your plan is adopted," the chief said; "we recognise the necessity of carrying it out. But this time again we must apply to you to choose the members of the council."

"Chance alone must decide the solution. All the sachems collected in this hall are great braves of their tribes. No matter on whom the lot falls, the members will behave honourably."

"Stronghand has spoken well, as he always does when he is called upon to give his opinion in the council of the chiefs; now let him finish what he has so well begun."

"Be it so: I will obey my father."

The hunter rose and left the hall, but his absence lasted only a few minutes. During this interval the chiefs remained motionless and silent. Stronghand soon returned, followed by Sparrowhawk.

"In this blanket," the hunter then said, "I have placed a number of bullets equal to that of the chiefs assembled in council. I have taken these bullets from the ammunition-bag of every one of the chiefs. I have noticed that our guns are of different bores, and hence some of the bullets are larger, others smaller. Each of us will draw a bullet haphazard; when all have one, they will be examined; and the three chiefs, if you fix on that number, or the five, if you prefer that number, to whom chance has given the largest bullets, will compose the new council."

The chiefs bowed their assent.

"But," the sachem continued, "before we begin drawing, let us first settle of how many members the council shall consist; shall there be three or five?"

"If I may be allowed," said a white trapper, "to offer my opinion on such a matter before wise men and renowned warriors, I would call your attention to the fact that, with a committee whose duties are so serious, three men are not sufficient to discuss a question advantageously, because it is so easy to obtain a majority. On the other hand, five men mutually enlighten each other by ex-



changing ideas. I will add one word: Will the white and half-breed hunters and trappers here present take part in the election?"

"Do they not fight with us?" Thunderbolt asked.

"That is true," the Whistler continued; "still it would be, perhaps, better for you to settle the matter among yourselves; we are, in reality, only your allies."

"You are our brothers and friends, in the name of the chiefs of the confederation. I thank you, Whistler, for the proposal you have made."

"You will do as you please. I spoke for your good."

While these remarks were exchanged between the trapper and Thunderbolt, the chiefs had decided that the military commission should be composed of five members. The drawing at once began; each warrior went, in his turn, to draw a bullet from the bag held by Sparrowhawk; then the verification was begun with that good faith and impartiality which the Indians display in all their actions when dealing with one another.

When the election was over, just as the chiefs were returning to their seats, Stronghand approached a trapper, who, ever since his entrance had seemed to shun his eye. Tapping him on the shoulder, he said in a low but imperative voice, "Master Kidd, two words, if you please."

The adventurer started at the touch, but turned his smiling face to the hunter's, and said, "I am quite at your service, caballero; can I be so happy as to be able to help you?"

"Yes," the hunter answered, drily.

"Speak, caballero, speak; and as far as lies in my power——"

"A truce to these hypocritical protestations," said Stronghand.

"I am listening to you," the other said, trying to hide his anxiety.

"Then leave the tower at once, mount your horse, and be off."

"Allow me," the bandit said, "to remark, my dear senor, that the idea seems to me a singular one."

"Do you think so?" the hunter remarked, coldly; "well, opinions differ."

"Of course you are jesting?"

"Do you fancy me capable of jesting—before all, with a man like you? Well, be off! I advise you for your own good."

"I must have an excuse for such a flight. What will my friends the hunters suppose?"

"That does not concern me; I want you to be off at once; if not——"

"Well?"

"I shall blow out your brains in the presence of all as a traitor and a spy."

The bandit started violently; his face became livid, and for some minutes he fixed his viper eye on the hunter, who examined him ironically; then bending down to his ear, he said, in a voice choked with rage and shame, "Stronghand, you are the stronger, and any resistance on my part would be mad; I shall go, therefore; but remember this, I shall be avenged."

Stronghand shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE COUNCIL OF THE SACHEMS.

THE chiefs resumed their seats, and the council, which had been momentarily interrupted, was re-opened by Thunderbolt. The Indians, though people think proper to regard them as savages, could give lessons in urbanity and good breeding. Each speaks in his turn. The speakers, who are listened to with a religious silence, have the liberty of expressing their ideas without fearing personalities, which are frequently offensive. When the debate is closed, the speaker—that is to say, the oldest chief, or the one of the highest position either through bravery or wisdom—sums up the discussion in a few words, takes the opinion of the other chiefs, who vote by nodding their heads, and the minority always accepts, without complaint or recrimination of any sort, the resolution of the majority.

"Now," said Stronghand, "I believe that the moment has arrived to strike the grand blow for which we have so long been preparing. Our enemies hesitate; they are demoralised; their soldiers tremble; and I am convinced they will not withstand the attack of our and the great Beaver's warriors. This is what I wished to say to the council."

A flattering murmur greeted the concluding remarks of the young man, who sat down, blushing.

"It appears to me," the Whistler then said, "the debate need not be a long one. As war is decided on, the council of the confederation has only to seek allies among the other Indian nations, in order to augment the number of our warriors, if that be possible."

Thunderbolt rose.

"Chiefs and sachems of the confederation of the Papazos," he said, in his sympathetic and sonorous voice, "and you, warriors, our allies, the moment for dissolving your council has at length arrived. Henceforth the committee of the five chiefs will alone sit. Each of you will return to his tribe, arm his warriors, and order the scalp-dance to be performed round the war-post; but the eighth sun must see you here again at the head of your warriors."

The chiefs rose in silence, resumed their weapons, and immediately left the village. Thunderbolt and Stronghand were left alone.

"My son," the old man then said, "have you nothing to tell me?"

"Yes, father," the young man respectfully answered; "I have very serious news for you."

But before describing the conversation between Thunderbolt and Stronghand, we are obliged to go back and tell the reader certain facts which had occurred at the Hacienda del Toro a few days before the majordomo set out for Hermosillo. Mexican girls, born and bred on the Indian border, enjoy a liberty which the want of society renders indispensable. Always on horseback upon these immense estates, which extend for twenty or five-and-twenty leagues, their life is spent in riding over hill and dale, visiting the wretched huts of the vaqueros



and peons, relieving their wants, and rendering themselves beloved by their simple graces and affecting goodness of heart.

Dona Marianna, who had been exiled for several years at a convent, so soon as she returned home, eagerly renewed her long rides through forests and prairies, to see again the persons in her father's employ with whom she had sported as a child, and of whom she had such a pleasant recollection.

Most usually Dona Marianna guided her horse to a rancho situated about three leagues from the hacienda, in the midst of a majestic forest of evergreen oaks and larches. This rancho, which was built of adobes, and whitewashed, stood on the bank of a stream, in the centre of a field sufficiently cleared to grow the grain required for the support of the poor inhabitants of the hovel. In the rear of the rancho was an enclosure, serving as a corral, and containing two cows and four or five horses, the sole fortune of the master of this rancho, which, however, internally was not so poverty-stricken as the exterior seemed to forebode. It was divided into three parts, two of which served as bed-rooms, and the third as sitting-room, saloon, kitchen, &c. In the latter, the fowls impudently came to pick up grain and pieces of tortillas which had been allowed to fall.

This rancho had been for many years inhabited by the same family, who were the last relics of the Indians dwelling here when the country was discovered by the Spaniards. These Indians, who were converted to Christianity, had been old and faithful servants of the Marquises de Moguer, who were always attached to them, and made it a point of honour to heighten their comforts, and give them their protection under all circumstances. Hence the devotion of these worthy people to the Moguer family was affecting, through its simple self-denial.

At the moment when we introduce this family to the reader, it consisted of three persons: the father, a blind old man, but upright and hale, who, in spite of his infirmity, still traversed all the forest-tracks without hesitation or risk of losing himself, merely accompanied by his dog Bouchaley; the mother, a woman about forty years of age, tall, robust, and possessing marked features, which, when she was younger, must have been very handsome; and the son, a young man about twenty, well-built, and a daring hunter, who held the post of tigrero at the hacienda.

Luisa Sanchez had been nurse to Dona Marianna, and the young lady, deprived at an early age of her mistress, had retained for her that excessive friendship which children generally have for their nurse, and which at times renders the mother jealous. The maiden's return to the hacienda caused great joy at the rancho; father, mother, and son at once mounted and proceeded to the toro to embrace their child, as they simply called her.

Since then not a day passed on which the young lady did not carry the sunshine of her presence to the rancho, and shared the breakfast of the family—a frugal meal, composed of light cakes, roasted on an iron plate, boiled beef seasoned with chile colorado, milk, and *quesadillas*, or cheese-cakes, hard and green and leathery, which the young lady, however, declared to be excellent, and heartily enjoyed. Bouchaley, like everybody else at the rancho, entertained a feeling of adoration for Dona Marianna. He was a long-haired black-and-white mastiff, about ten years old, and spiteful and noisy like all his congeners.

Marianno Sanchez, the tigrero, had for his foster-sister an affection heightened by the similarity of name—a similarity which in Spanish America gives a right to a sort of spiritual relationship. This touching custom, whose origin is entirely Indian, is intended to draw closer the relations between *tocayo* and *tocaya*, and they are almost brother and sister.



It was about eleven o'clock in the morning; the sun illumined the hut; the birds were singing merrily in the forest. Father Sanchez had taken up the handmill, and was grinding the wheat, while his wife, after sifting the wheat, pounded it, and formed it into light cakes, called tortillas, which, after being griddled, would form the solid portion of the breakfast. Bouchaley was at his post on the road, watching for the arrival of the young lady.

"How is it," the old man asked, "that Marianno is not here yet?"

"Poor lad! who knows where he is at this moment?" the mother answered. "He has for some days been watching a band of jaguars. I only trust he will not be devoured some day by the terrible animals."

"Nonsense, wife," said the old man. "Marianno devoured by the tigers!"

"Well, I see nothing impossible in that."

"You might just as well say that Bouchaley is capable of chasing a peccari; one thing is as possible as the other. Besides, you forget our son never goes out without his dog Bigote."

"I do not say no, father," she continued, with a shake of the head; "that does not prevent his being a dangerous trade."

"Stuff! besides, the trade is lucrative; each jaguar-skin brings him in fourteen piastres—a sum we cannot afford to despise, since my infirmity prevents me from working. It would be better for my old carcase to return to the earth, as I am no longer good for anything."

"Do not speak so, father; especially before our daughter."

"Well, tell me, wife," the old man said, laughingly, "was I devoured by the jaguar? And yet I was a tigrero for more than forty years."

"That is true; you have not been devoured, but your father was."

"Hem!" the old man went on; "I will answer—I will answer——"

"Nothing; and that will be the best," she continued.

"Nonsense! What do you take me for, mother? If my father was devoured, and that is true, it was——"

"Well, what? I am anxious to hear."

"Because they were treacherously attacked by the jaguars," he said, with a triumphant air; "the wretches knew whom they had to deal with, and so played cunning."

The ranchera shrugged her shoulders with a smile, but she considered it unnecessary to answer, as she was well aware she would not succeed in making her husband change his opinion. The old man, satisfied with having reduced his wife to silence, did not abuse his victory.

All at once Bouchaley was heard barking furiously. The old man drew himself up in his butacca, while Na Sanchez rushed to the doorway, in which Dona Marianna appeared, fresh and smiling.

"Good morning, father! good morning, mother!" she exclaimed, in her silvery voice. "Come, Bouchaley, come, be quiet!" she added, patting the dog. "Mother, ask my tocayo to put Negro in the corral, for the good animal has earned its alfalfa."

"I will go, Querida," the old man said, "for to-day I take Marianno's place."

"Mother," the young lady continued, "where is my foster-brother. I trust he will soon be here."

The mother sighed deeply.

The maiden looked at her for a moment sympathetically.

"What is the matter, mother?" she said; "can any accident have happened?"



"The Lord guard us from it, Querida!" Luisa said, clasping her hands.

"Still, you are anxious, mother. You are hiding something from me."

"Nothing, my child. Nothing extraordinary has occurred. But——"

"But what?" Dona Marianna interrupted her.

"Well, since you insist, Querida, I confess to you that I am alarmed. You know that Marianno is tigrero to the hacienda?"

"Yes. What then?"

"I am always frightened lest he should meet with an accident."

"Come, come, mother; do not have such thoughts. Marianno is an intrepid hunter."

"Ah, hija, you are of the same opinion as my old man."

"Oh, mother, why talk in that way? Marianno, I hope, runs no danger."

"May you be saying the truth, dear child!"

"I am so convinced of it that I will not sit down till he arrives."

"Well, you will not have to wait long, hijita," the old man said.

In fact, the furious gallop of a horse echoed in the forest, and approached with the rapidity of a hurricane. The two females darted to the door. At this moment a horseman appeared on the skirt of the clearing, riding at full speed, with his hair floating in the breeze, and his face animated by the speed at which he rode. This horseman, who was powerfully and yet gracefully built, and had a manly, energetic face, was Marianno, the tigrero. His dog, a black-and-white Newfoundland, with powerful chest and enormous head, was running by the side of the horse, and looking up intelligently every moment.

"Viva Dios! Querida tocaya!" the young man exclaimed. "I am glad to see you, for I was afraid that I should arrive too late. Bigote," he added, addressing his dog, "lead Moreno to the corral."

The dog immediately proceeded thither, followed by the horse, while Marianno and the two females returned to the rancho. The young man kissed his father's forehead, and took his hand, saying, "Good morning, papa!" and then returned to his mother.

"Cruel child!" she said to him; "why did you delay so long?"

"Pay no attention to what your mother says," the old man remarked.

"Fie! you must not say that!" the young lady exclaimed; "you would do better in scolding Marianno, for I, too, felt alarmed."

"Do not be angry with me," the young man replied; "I have been for some days on the track of a family of jaguars."

"Are they about here?"

"No; they are prowlers brought here by the drought, and are the more dangerous because they do not belong to these parts."

"I only hope they will not think of coming here," the mother anxiously remarked.

"I do not believe they will, for wild beasts shun the vicinity of man. Still, Dona Marianna had better, for some days to come, restrict her rides."

"What can I have to fear?"

"Nothing, I hope; still it is better to act prudently. Wild beasts are animals whose habits it is very difficult to discover."

"Nonsense!" the young lady said; "you are trying to frighten me."

"Do not believe that. I will accompany you with Bigote to the hacienda."

The dog, which had returned to its master's side after performing its duties, wagged its tail, and looked up in her face.

"I will not allow that, tocayo," the young lady replied. "let Bigote have a



rest. I came alone, and will return alone; and mounted on Negro, I defy the tigers to catch me up."

"Still, nina——" Marianno objected.

"Not a word more on the subject, tocayo, I beg. Let us breakfast, for I am literally dying of hunger."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### LOST!

THEY sat down to table; but the meal, in spite of Dona Marianna's efforts to enliven it, suffered from the anxiety which two of the party felt. The tigrero was vexed with his foster-sister for not letting him accompany her, for he had not liked to express his fears, lest the young lady on her return to the hacienda might meet the ferocious animals he had been pursuing for some days.

The jaguar, which is very little known in Europe, is one of the scourges of Mexico. It is the great wild-cat of Cuvier, and is called indiscriminately "the American tiger," and the "panther of the furriers." It is a quadruped of the feline race; its total length is about nine feet, and its height about twenty-seven inches. Its skin is handsome, and in great request; while of a bright tawny hue on the back, it is marked on the head, neck, and along the flanks with black spots; the lower part of the body is white, with irregular black spots.

Such were the animals the tigrero had been pursuing for the last few days, and had not been able to catch up. According to the sign he had found, the jaguars were four in number—the male, female, and two cubs. We can now understand what the young man's terror must be on thinking of the terrible dangers to which his foster-sister ran a risk of being exposed on her return to the hacienda; but he knew Dona Marianna too well to hope he could make her recall her decision.

As always happens under such circumstances, Dona Marianna, seeing that no one referred again to the jaguars, was the first to talk about them, asking her foster-brother the details of their appearance in the country, and the mischief they had done, in what way he meant to surprise them, and a multitude of other questions, to which the young man replied most politely, but limiting himself to brief answers, and without launching into details, which are generally so agreeable to a hunter.

Several hours passed in laughing, talking, and singing. When the moment for departure at length arrived, Marianno went to the corral to fetch the young lady's horse, saddled it with the utmost care, and led it to the door of the rancho, after saddling his own horse, so that he might start so soon as Dona Marianna was out of sight of the rancho.

"You remained a long time in the corral, tocayo," she said, with a laugh.

"Nina," he said, "after saddling your horse, I saddled mine."

"Of course you are going to hunt your strange jaguars again?"

"Oh, of course," he answered.



"Well," she said, "if you do meet them, pray do not miss them."

"I will avoid that, because I desire to make you a present of their skins."

The maiden, still laughing, embraced the rancho and his wife, bounded lightly into the saddle, and, bending down gracefully, offered her hand to Marianno.

Then she gave a parting wave of the hand to her nurse, and started off at a gallop. The young man, after watching her for a while, to be certain of the road she followed, then re-entered the rancho, took his gun, and loaded it with all the care which hunters display in this operation when they believe that life depends on the accuracy of their aim.

"Are you really about to start at once?" his mother asked him.

"Yes, to follow my foster-sister to the hacienda, without her seeing me."

"That is a good idea. Do you fear any danger for her?"

"Not the slightest. But it is a long distance from here to the hacienda; the Indians are moving, it is said."

"Excellently reasoned. The nina is wrong in crossing the forest alone."

"Poor child!" the rancho said; "an accident happens so easily; lose no time, muchacho, but be off."

But the young man was no longer listening to his father; so soon as his gun was loaded he left the rancho, followed by his dog.

So soon as the young lady found herself at a sufficient distance from the rancho she had checked her horse's pace, which was now proceeding at an amble.

Dona Marianna, whose mind was impressionable, and open to all sensations, gently yielded to the impressions of the scene, which was so full of ineffable harmony, and, gradually forgetting where she was and surrounding objects, had fallen into a voluptuous reverie.

Dona Marianna had rather a long ride through the forest before reaching the plain; but she had so often ridden the road at all hours of the day, she was so thoroughly persuaded that no danger menaced her, that she let the bridle hang on her horse's neck, while she plunged deeper and deeper into the delicious reverie which had seized on her. In the meanwhile the shades grew deeper; the birds had concealed themselves in the foliage and ceased their songs; the sun had disappeared, and the hot red beams it had left on the horizon were beginning to die out; the wind blew with greater force through the branches, which uttered long murmurs; the sky was assuming deeper tints, and night was rapidly approaching. Already the shrill cries of the coyotes rose in the unexplored depths of the forest.

All at once a long, startling, strident howl, bearing some resemblance to the mewling of a cat, burst through the air. Dona Marianna looked up, and took an anxious glance around her. She had lost her way. A person lost in an American forest is dead!

The maiden tried to find the route by which she had come, but the road followed haphazard through the herbage no longer existed; the grass trodden by her horse's hoof had sprung up again behind it. Moreover, the night was so dark that Dona Marianna could not see four paces ahead of her; and she soon found that her efforts to find the road would only result in leading her further astray. Under such circumstances a man would have been in a comparatively far less dangerous position. He could have lit a fire to combat the night chill, and keep the wild beasts at bay; in the event of an attack, his weapons would have allowed him to defend himself; but Dona Marianna had not the means to light a fire; she had no weapons, and, had she possessed them, she would not have known how to use them. She was forced to remain



motionless at the spot where she was for the whole night, at the hazard of dying of cold and terror.

Her horse, whose bridle she had not let loose, was standing motionless by her side. The maiden gently patted the noble animal, the only friend left to her; then, by a sudden inspiration, she began unfastening the girths.

"Poor Negro," she said, in a soft voice, as she removed the trappings, "you must not be the victim of my imprudence; resume your liberty, for the noble instinct with which your Creator has endowed you will perhaps enable you to find your road. Go, my poor Negro; you are now free."

The animal gave a whinneying of delight, made a prodigious leap, and disappeared in the darkness. Dona Marianna was alone—really alone now.

It is impossible to imagine what terrors night brings with it under its thick mantle of mist, when the earth is no longer warmed by the sparkling sunbeams, and darkness reigns as supreme lord. At that time everything changes its aspect, and assumes in the flickering rays of the moon a fantastic appearance; the mountains seem loftier, the rivers wider and deeper; the trees resemble spectres—gloomy denizens of the tomb, watching for you to pass, and ready to clutch you in their fleshless arms. The imagination becomes heated, ideas grow confused, you tremble at the fall of a leaf, at the moaning of the night breeze, at the breakage of a branch; and, suffering from a horrible nightmare, you fancy at every moment that your last hour is at hand.

Without dwelling further on the subject, the reader can imagine without difficulty the painful situation in which Dona Marianna found herself. So long as she could hear the sound of her horse's hoofs, as it fled at full speed, she stood with her body bent forward and outstretched ears, attaching herself to life, and, perchance to hope, through the sound which was so familiar to her; but when it had died out in the distance, when a leaden silence once again weighed on her, the maiden shuddered, and, folding her hands on her chest, sank in a half-fainting condition at the foot of a tree—no longer thinking or hoping, but awaiting death.

How long did she remain plunged in this state of prostration, which was only an anticipated death—one hour or five minutes? She could not have said. All at once a feeble, almost indistinguishable, sound smote her ear, and she instinctively listened. This sound grew louder with every second, and ere long she could not be mistaken; it was a rapid mad gallop through the forest. This sound Dona Marianna recognised with terror; for it was produced by the return of her horse. For the noble animal to come back with such velocity it must be pursued, and that closely, by ferocious animals. The horse gave a snort of terror, which was immediately answered by two loud, sharp growls. Then, as if dreaming, Dona Marianna heard prodigious leaps; she saw ill-omened shadows pass before her with the rapidity of a lightning flash, and then a fearful struggle, in which groans of agony were mingled with yells of delight.

However terrible the maiden's position might be she felt the tears slowly course down her cheeks—her horse, her last comrade, had succumbed—the liberty she had granted it had only precipitated its destruction.

Fortunately for the girl, the jaguars—for there were several of them—were to leeward; moreover, they had tasted blood, and this was a double reason which temporarily saved her, by depriving their scent of nearly all its delicacy.

All at once the animals, which had hitherto been greedily engaged with the carcase of the horse, without thinking of anything beyond making a hearty meal, raised their heads and began sniffing savagely. Dona Marianna saw their eyes, sparkling like live coals, fixed upon her; she understood that she



was lost; instinctively she closed her eyes to escape the fascination of those metallic eyeballs, which seemed in the darkness to emit electric sparks, and prepared to die. Still the jaguars did not stir; they were crouching on the remains of the horse, and, while continuing to gaze at the maiden, gracefully passed their paws over their ears with a purr of pleasure—in a word, they were coquettishly performing their toilet, appearing not only most pleased with the meal they had just ended, but with that which was awaiting them.

Still, in spite of the calmness affected by the two animals, it was evident that for some unknown motive they were restless; they lashed the ground with their weighty tails, or laid back their ears with a roar of anger, and, turning their heads in all directions, sniffed the air. They scented a danger; but of what nature was it?

At the same instant a flash traversed the air—a shot echoed far and wide—and the male jaguar writhed on the ground with a roar of agony. Almost immediately a man dashed from the tree at the foot of which Dona Marianna was crouching, stood in front of her, and received the shock of the female, which, at the shot, had instinctively bounded forward. The man tottered, but for all that kept his feet; there was a frightful struggle, and then the jaguar fell back with a last and fearful yell.

"Come," the hunter said, as he wiped on the grass the long machete with which he had stabbed the beast, "my arrangements were well made, but I fancy that I arrived only just in time. Now for the cubs."

Then this man, who seemed to possess the faculty of seeing in the darkness, walked without hesitation towards the spot where the female had hidden her cubs. He resolutely entered the thicket, and came out again almost immediately, holding a cub in either hand. He smashed their heads against the trunk of a tree.

"That is a very tidy butchery," he said; "but what on earth is Don Hernando's tigrero about that I am obliged to do his work?"

While saying this the hunter had collected all the dry wood within reach and struck a light. The stranger then hurried to the assistance of Dona Marianna, who had fainted.

"Poor girl!" he muttered, with an accent of gentle pity, as he lifted her in his arms and gently laid her on some firs he had arranged for her bed, and gazed at her for a moment with a look of delight impossible to describe. But then he felt considerably embarrassed. He knew how, at a pinch, to dress a wound or extract a bullet, but he was quite ignorant how to bring a fainting woman round.

"Still, I cannot leave her in this state, poor girl! But what am I to do?"

At length he knelt down by the young lady's side, gently raised her lovely head, which he laid on his knee, and, opening with his dagger-point her closed lips, poured in a few drops of Catalonian refino contained in a gourd. The effect of this remedy was instantaneous; she heaved a sigh, and opened her lips. At the first moment she looked around her wildly, but ideas seemed gradually to return to her brain; her contracted features grew brighter, and fixing her eyes on the hunter, who was still bending over her, she muttered, with an expression of gratitude which made the young man's heart beat, "Stronghand!"

"Have you recognised me, senorita?" he exclaimed.

"Are you not my Providence?" she answered.

"Oh, senorita!" he murmured, in great embarrassment.

"Thanks! thanks, my saviour!" she continued, seizing his hand; "thanks



for having come to my help, Stronghand. I should have been lost without you."

"I really believe," he said, with a smile, "that I arrived just in time."

"But how is it you came so opportunely?" she asked, curiously.

"Oh," said the hunter, "it is very simple. I have been hunting in these parts for some days past. I had tracked this family of jaguars, which I obstinately determined to kill, I know not why. After pursuing them all day, I had lost them, and was seeking their trail, when your horse enabled me to recover it."

"What!—my horse?" she exclaimed, in amazement.

"Do you not remember that it was I who gave you this poor Negro?"

"That is true," she murmured, as she let her eyes fall.

"I saw you for a moment this morning when you were going to Sanchez' rancho."

"Go on," she remarked.

"On seeing the horse, which I at once recognised, I feared that some accident had happened to you, and set out after it. But the jaguars had scented it at the same time. Luckily, they were hungry, and amused themselves by devouring poor Negro."

"But how is it that you came by this strange road?"

"In the first place, I was bound to save your life."

"But you ran the risk of being torn in pieces by the horrible animals," she said, with a shudder.

"That is possible," he said; "but I should have died to save you."

The maiden made no reply. Pensive and blushing, she bowed her head on her chest. The hunter thought that he had offended her, and also remained silent and constrained. At length Dona Marianna raised her head.

"Thank you again!" she said, with a gentle smile. "Your heart is good. You did not hesitate to sacrifice your life for me, whom you scarce know."

"I am too amply repaid for my services by these words, senorita," he replied, with marked hesitation; "still I have a favour to ask you."

"Oh, speak, speak! tell me what I can do!"

"I know not how to explain it; my request will appear to you so strange."

"Speak; for I feel convinced that the favour you pretend to ask of me is merely another service you wish to render to me."

"Well, senorita," said Stronghand, "it is this: should you ever, for any reason neither you nor I can foresee, need advice, or help of a friend, either for yourself or any member of your family, do nothing till you have seen me."

"Be it so," at length said Dona Marianna; "I promise. But how am I to find you?"

"Your foster-brother is my friend; you will request him to lead you."

All at once a loud noise, resembling the passage of a wild beast, was heard in the forest glade; the maiden started, and instinctively clung to the hunter.

"Fear nothing, senorita," the latter said; "do you not recognise a friend?"

At the same moment the tigrero's dog leaped up to fondle her, followed almost instantaneously by Marianno.

"Heaven be blessed!" he said, joyfully, "she is saved!"



## CHAPTER XX.

### THE RETURN.

WE must now explain how it was the tigrero arrived too late. He had started believing Marianna to be ahead of him until darkness set in. Then the darkness was, indeed, so thick, that in spite of all his exertions, he could distinguish nothing a few paces ahead of him.

The tigrero halted, dismounted, placed his ear on the ground, and listened. A moment later he heard, or fancied he heard, a distant sound resembling a horse's gallop. As he was only two leagues from the Hacienda del Toro, he soon reached the foot of the rock. While unable to form any decision, he saw a black outline gliding along the path, and soon distinguished a horseman coming towards him.

"Buena noche, caballero," he said, when the latter crossed him.

"Dios la de a usted buena," the other politely replied.

"Ah!" the horseman said. "How is No Marianno?"

"Very well," the tigrero answered; "and you, No Paredes? Are you going to the rancho?"

"Yes; the senor marquis has sent me."

"Would there be any indiscretion in asking what you are going to do?"

"Not the slightest, compadre. I am simply going to fetch Dona Marianna, who has remained to-day later than usual with her nurse."

This revelation was a thunder-clap for the young man.

"What!" he exclaimed, "is not Dona Marianna at the hacienda?"

"No!" said Paredes, beginning to grow anxious in his turn. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Dona Marianna left the rancho full three hours ago; that I followed her without her knowledge to watch over her safety, and that she must have been at the hacienda for more than half an hour."

Without losing time in longer argument the two men dashed up the rock at a gallop, and in a few minutes reached the gate of the hacienda. No one had seen Dona Marianna. The alarm was instantly given; Don Hernando wished to ride off at the head of his people, and beat up the country in search of his daughter, and it was with great difficulty that he was induced to abandon the project.

Marianno had an idea of his own. When he was quite certain that his foster-sister had not returned, he presumed the truth—that she was lost in the forest. The tigrero let Don Ruiz, the majordomo, and the peons pass him, and then beat his steps towards the rancho, closely followed by his dog, in spite of the exhortations of his young master, and No Paredes, who wanted to accompany them. When he was in the forest he stopped for a moment, as if to look round him; then, after most carefully examining the spot where he was, he dismounted, fastened his horse's bridle to the pommel, tied the stirrups together to keep them from clanking, and gave his horse a friendly smack on the crupper.

"Go along, Moreno," he said to it; "return to the rancho."



The horse turned its fine intelligent head to its master, gave a neigh of pleasure, and started at a gallop in the direction of the rancho. The tigrero carefully examined his gun, and began inspecting the ground by the light of a torch. Bigote, gravely seated on its hind legs, followed its master's every movement. After a lengthened search, the tigrero whistled to his dog, which at once ran up.

"Bigote," he said, "smell these marks; they were made by the horse of your mistress, Marianna."

The noble animal did as its master ordered.

"Good, Bigote! good, my famous dog!" the tigrero continued; "and now let us follow the trail."

The dog hesitated for a moment, then it set out with its nose to the ground, closely followed by its master; both reached the spot where the horrible drama we recently described occurred.

"When I heard Stronghand's shot," the tigrero added, as he concluded his narrative, "I experienced a sound of deadly agony. Well, tocaya, will you now believe in the jaguars?"

"Oh, silence, Marianno!" the young lady said, with a shudder; "I almost went mad with terror. Oh! had it not been for this brave and honest hunter I should have been lost."

"Brave and honest, indeed!" the tigrero said, with frank affection; "you are right, senorita, for Stronghand might justly be called Goodheart."

Dona Marianna listened with lively pleasure to this praise of the man who had saved her life.

"Come, come, Marianno," Stronghand said, in order to cut short the young man's compliments, "we cannot remain here any longer."

"Carai, master, you are right, as usual; but what is to be done? I am strong," said the senorita; "under your escort, my friends, I fear nothing."

"No, senorita," the hunter said, with an accent of gentle authority, "your strength would betray your courage."

"Very good," she answered; "act as you think proper."

"That is right," the tigrero said. "What are we going to do, Stronghand?"

"While you skin the jaguars—I suppose you do not wish to leave them——"

"What!" the tigrero interrupted him, "those skins belong to you."

"Pooh!" the hunter said, with a laugh, "I am not a tigrero; the skins are yours."

"Since that is the case I will not decline; but as, for my part, I promised to give my foster-sister the skins to make a rug, I will beg her to accept them."

"Very good," she answered; "they will remind me of the danger I incurred."

"That is settled, then," the hunter said.

Hunters and trappers are skilful and most expeditious men; in a few minutes Marianno had skinned the jaguars, and Stronghand formed a litter; the skins, after being carefully folded, were securely fastened on the back of Bigote, who did not at all like the burden imposed on him. Stronghand covered the litter with leaves and grass, over which he laid the saddle-cloth of the horse the jaguars had devoured; then he requested the young lady to seat herself on this soft divan, and the two men, taking it on their strong shoulders, started in the direction of the hacienda.

Although the hunters had, from excess of precaution, formed torches of ocote-wood to help them, the darkness was so complete—the trees were so close together—that it was with extreme difficulty that they succeeded in advancing in this inextricable labyrinth. They had been marching for a long distance, and the forest seemed as savage as when they started.



"Do you believe," Dona Marianna asked, "that we are on the right road?"

"Even admitting, senora," the hunter said, "that Marianno and myself were capable of falling into an error, we have with us an infallible guide in Bigote."

"Within ten minutes, senorita," the tigrero said, "we shall enter the road."

All at once the two men stopped. At the same moment Dona Marianna heard shouts.

"Forward! forward!" said Stronghand; "let us not leave your relatives and friends in anxiety longer than we can help."

In ten minutes they reached the road to the hacienda.

"What shall we do now?" Marianna asked.

"I think that we ought to announce our presence by a cry for help."

"Yes," she said, "I think we ought to do so; for otherwise we run a risk of reaching the hacienda without meeting any of the persons sent to seek me."

"You are right, nina; for all these worthy people are attached to you."

"That is a further reason why we should hasten to announce our return," the young lady answered.

The two hunters, after consulting for a moment, uttered together that long shrill yell, which, in the desert as in the mountains, serves as the rallying cry, and may be heard for an enormous distance. Almost immediately the whole forest seemed to be aroused; similar cries broke out in all directions, and the hunters noticed red dots running with extreme rapidity between the trees, and all converging on the spot where they stood, as if they radiated from a common centre. In a few minutes all the persons were assembled round the litter on which the young lady reclined; and Don Ruiz and the majordomo were not long ere they arrived.

"Brother," Dona Marianna said to Don Ruiz, "if you find me still alive you owe it to the man who before saved us both from the pirates of the prairies."

"Where is he?" Don Ruiz asked—"where is he? that I may express my gratitude."

But he was sought for in vain.

"Why this flight?" Dona Marianna murmured with a stifled sigh; "does this strange man fear lest our gratitude should prove too warm?"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### CHANCE WORK.

DONA Marianna's return to the hacienda was a real triumphal procession. The peons, delighted at having found their mistress again safe and sound, gaily bore her on their shoulders, laughing, singing, and dancing along the road.



not knowing how otherwise to express their joy, and yet desirous to make her comprehend the pleasure they felt.

The marquis, who was suffering the most frightful agitation, had gone to the last gate to meet them, and would possibly have gone further still had not Don Ruiz taken the precaution, so soon as his sister was found, to send off a peon to tranquillise his mind and announce the successful result.

The maiden threw herself with an outburst of tears into her father's arms, and at length, yielding to her feelings, fainted—an accident which, by arousing the anxiety of the spectators, cut short all the demonstrations.

In spite of the offer of No Paredes, who invited him to spend the night at the hacienda, the tigrero would not consent; and after freeing Bigote from the jaguars' skins, which seemed to cause the dog considerable pleasure, they both started gaily for the rancho. It was about two o'clock A.M., and a splendid night, and the tigrero was walking at a steady pace, when, just as he was entering the shadow of the forest, Stronghand suddenly emerged from a thicket.

"Hilloh!" the tigrero said, on recognising him; "where the deuce did you get to just now?"

"Do you fancy," replied the hunter, "that it is very pleasant to be stared at by those semi-idiotic peons?"

"Well, opinions are free, compadre, and I will not argue with you, but where on earth are you going at such an hour?"

"Looking for you, to ask hospitality for a few days."

"Our house is not large, but sufficiently so to contain such a guest."

"I thank you, gossip, but I shall not abuse your complaisance."

"As you please, Stronghand; the door of my humble rancho is ever open to you."

All was settled in a few words. The two men continued their walk, and soon reached the rancho. The tigrero led the hunter to his bedroom, where they lay down side by side, and soon fell asleep.

One day, about a week after the scene with the jaguars, the hunter was lying half-asleep in a copse whose leafy branches completely hid him from sight, and quietly enjoying his siesta during the great mid-day heat, when he fancied he heard the sound of footsteps. He instinctively opened his eyes, raising himself on his elbow, and looked carefully around him; he checked a cry of surprise on recognising Kidd, the bandit.

"What does that scoundrel want here?" the hunter asked himself. "He is doubtless plotting some infamy."

In the meanwhile Kidd removed his horse's bit, and, sitting down on a rock, lit a husk cigarette. Stronghand racked his brains in vain to try and discover the motive for the presence of the bandit in these parts. Suddenly a sound made him turn his head, and he saw a stout horseman, with rubicund face, coming up at an amble. When he reached the adventurer, the latter rose, and bowed respectfully.

"Ouf!" the stout man said, with a sigh of relief, "what a ride!"

"Well," the bandit replied, "you must blame yourself, Don Rufino, for you arranged it."

"Everybody is the best judge of his own business, Master Kidd," Don Rufino remarked.

"That is possible; but if I had the honour to be Don Rufino Contreras, enormously rich, and senator to boot, hang me if I would put myself out of my way to run after an adventurer like Master Kidd."

"Ha! ha! scoundrel; you have scented something."



"Hang it!" the bandit replied, "I am well aware that whatever attractions my conversation may offer, you would not have come this distance expressly to hear it."

"That is possible, scamp. However, listen to me."

"I can see from your familiarity that the job will be an expensive one."

"Enough of this," said the senator, "let us come to facts."

"I ask nothing better."

"I want to know, scoundrel, whether in a case of necessity you would kill a man for money?"

"Killing a man is nothing when you are well paid for it."

"I will pay one thousand piastres. Is that enough?"

"It is not too much."

"Confound it, you are expensive."

"That is possible; but I do my work. Tell me who the man is?"

"Jose Paredes, the majordomo at the Toro."

"Do you know that he is not an easy man to kill. You owe him a grudge."

"I do not know him."

You do not know him, and yet offer one thousand piastres for his death? Nonsense!"

"It is so."

"But you must have a reason; a man is not killed without."

"Listen to me attentively, in two or three days the majordomo will leave for Hermosillo, carrying bills to a considerable amount."

"Good," the bandit said; "I will kill him as he passes."

"No, you will let him go in peace, and you will kill him on his return."

"That is true. Where the deuce was my head?"

"You will deliver to me the sum this man is the bearer of," said Don Rufino.

"I suppose the sum is large?" said the bandit.

"Fifty thousand piastres."

"Viva Dios! Surrender such a fortune? I would sooner be burned alive."

"Nonsense," the senator remarked, contemptuously. "For you will then lose two thousand piastres."

Suddenly the bandit's eyes gleamed with a sinister flash; he drew himself up, and leaped, knife in hand, upon the senator. But the adventurer had a powerful adversary. Don Rufino had long known the man he was treating with, and, while conversing, had not once taken his eye off him. Hence, though Kidd's action was so rapid, Don Rufino was before him; he seized his arm with his left hand, while with the right he placed a pistol to his chest.

"Hilloh, my master," he said, "are you mad, or has a wasp stung you?"

"Let me loose!" said the bandit savagely.

"Not before you have thrown your knife away, scoundrel!"

Kidd opened his hand, the knife fell on the ground.

"You are not half clever enough," said Don Rufino, sarcastically; "you deserve to have your brains blown out."

"I do not always miss my mark," replied the bandit.

There was a moment of silence between the two men.

"Have you reflected?" at length asked Don Rufino.

"Well, I accept," said Kidd, sullenly.

"But you understand," the senator continued; "no trickery this time?"

"No, no," Kidd answered, with a shake of the head; "you may be sure of that."



"I reckon on your honesty. Moreover, profit by what has occurred to-day. I am not always so good tempered."

"All right," said the bandit, shrugging his shoulders savagely; "there is no need to threaten, as all is settled. Where shall I come to you after the business?"

"Do not trouble yourself about that. I shall manage to find you."

"Very good. Give me the money."

The senator drew from his pocket a long purse, through whose meshes gold coins could be seen. He weighed it for an instant in his hand, and then threw it twenty paces from him.

"Go and fetch it," he said.

The bandit dashed at the gold, which as it fell produced a ringing sound.

"Good-bye," said Don Rufino to the bandit. "Remember!" and he started at a gallop.

"All right," said Kidd, with a smile upon his features, as he hid the purse in his bosom. "No matter," he added, "I allow that I am in your power, demon; but if ever I had you in my hands as you had me to-day, and I manage to discover one of your secrets, I should not be so mad as to show you any mercy."

So soon as he was alone, the hunter rose.

"Oh, oh!" he muttered, "that is a dark plot. That man cannot want to kill Paredes merely to rob him."

## CHAPTER XXII.

### FATHER AND SON.

Now that we have given the reader all necessary information about the events accomplished at the Hacienda del Toro, we will resume our narrative at the point where we were compelled to leave it—that is to say, we will return to the village of the Papazos, and the conversation between Thunderbolt and Stronghand.

Stronghand was not surprised to hear that the great and general rising of the Indians had been decided on, but his horror and grief may be imagined when he found that it was intended to capture the Hacienda del Toro as their headquarters.

His emotion was so great that his mother partially guessed his secret, and when, having heard all, he bowed to his father, and went out, she whispered, "Hope."

Still Stronghand quitted the pyramid in a state of indescribable agitation. The word his mother had whispered in his ear at parting incessantly recurred to his mind, and led him to suppose that Dona Esperanza, with that miraculous intuition Heaven has given to mothers, that they may discover the most hidden feelings of their children, had divined the secret he fancied he had buried in the remotest corner of his heart. It was with difficulty he could



restore some degree of order in his ideas, and resume his coolness and self-mastery before he reached his own door. Two men were standing there—Whistle and Peccari.

"Come along," the trapper shouted; "we have been waiting for a long while."

"Waiting for me?" he asked, in surprise.

"Yes. Sparrowhawk warned us, on the part of Thunderbolt, that the chief and myself were to hold ourselves in readiness to escort the man who entered the village with you wherever he thinks proper to go."

"What else has happened?"

"Nothing, except that Thunderbolt has made this man a present of a mule, laden with rich wares, as Sparrowhawk says."

Stronghand entered, and found the majordomo busily engaged in making his preparations for a start.

"You are welcome, comrade," he said. "Carai! you are a man of your word, so forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?" the young man asked, with a smile.

"When I saw you leave me this morning in this hole, like a useless or noxious animal, I doubted your sincerity; and I was on the point of running away."

"You would have done wrong."

"Carai! I see it now; hence I feel quite confused at my folly, and beg you once again to forgive me."

"Nonsense," the hunter said, with a laugh, "it is not worth while to torment yourself about such a trifle. An escort of resolute men will accompany you to the hacienda, and as your master will not ask you what may have happened to you on your journey, I think it unnecessary for you to give him any details."

"Be easy. Ah! that reminds me that, as I have received the money from you, you must have the bills. Here they are, and once again I thank you."

The hunter took the bills and concealed them in his bosom. There was a moment of silence. The majordomo walked about the calli with an air of embarrassment.

"Come," asked the hunter, "what else is there that troubles you, my friend?"

"On my faith," the Mexican replied, "I confess that I should be delighted to prove my gratitude to you for the service you have done me."

"Is that all?" the hunter said. "It is a very easy matter."

"Is it?" he remarked, with surprise. "Well, you will not believe that I have been racking my brains over it for more than half an hour?"

"Because you seek badly, my friend, that is all; you know that I frequently hunt in your parts?"

"Yes; I am aware of that."

"Well, the first time I find myself near you, I will come and ask hospitality."

"Ah; that is what I call a good idea."

"I take you at your word; so that is settled."

"Very good. Now I shall start happy. Come by day or night, as you may think proper, and you will always be welcome."

"I fancy it would be difficult to get into the hacienda by night."

"Not at all. You will only have to mention my name."

Several days elapsed, and nothing of an interesting nature occurred in the village. The military committee sat several hours during the interval. The



plan of the coming campaign was definitively arranged, and the collection of the Indian forces was the only thing that delayed the outbreak of hostilities.

At last the Papazos chiefs had succeeded in collecting beneath their totems 30,000 warriors, all mounted on excellent horses, and about 4,000 armed with guns. It is true that the Indians, though so skilful in the use of the axe, the lance, and the bow, are deplorable marksmen, and have an instinctive dread of firearms, which prevents their taking a proper aim. Still, some of them succeed in attaining a relative skill, and are dangerous in a fight. But the greatest strength of the Indian army consisted of the sixty or eighty white and half-breed hunters, whom the hope of plunder had induced to join them.

Thunderbolt, while retaining the supreme command of the army, appointed three chiefs as generals of division; they were Sparrowhawk, Whistler, and Peccari. Stronghand took the command of twenty-five white hunters, whom he selected among the bravest and most honourable, and was entrusted with a special mission by his father. All being then in readiness to begin the war, the Indians, according to their invariable custom, only awaited a moonless night to invade the territory of their enemies.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE WHITE-SKINS.

THE return of Jose Paredes to the hacienda caused Don Hernando a lively pleasure. Still, the sum he brought, though considerable, was far from sufficing for the constant outlay in working the mine, and would hardly cover the demands of the moment. Don Rufino did not in any way show the amazement the sight of the majordomo occasioned him.

He knew it would take three weeks to proceed from the hacienda to Hermosillo and back, even at a good pace, and yet the majordomo had only been absent for nine days. It was evident to the senator that Paredes had not been to Hermosillo, and yet he brought back the money.

He was supposed to be ignorant of the motive of the majordomo's journey, and consequently could not interrogate him; and, again, Paredes would probably not have answered him, or, if he had done so, it would only have been in mockery, for the worthy majordomo, with the infallible scent which upright and faithful men possess, had detected the wolf in sheep's clothing.

In Sonora, as in other countries, it is not easy to meet at a moment's notice persons who will discount large bills to render you a service. The man who had given the money for these must be very rich, and most desirous to assist the marquis. However much the senator thought of the subject, he could not call to mind any landowner for fifty leagues round capable of acting in such a way. Moreover, the discounter must have been aware of the plot formed against the majordomo, for otherwise he would not have proposed to take the bills.



"The red-skins are right," he muttered, "and their proverb is true. In the desert trees have ears, and leaves have eyes. I remember that my conversation with that picaro of a Kidd took place near a very close-growing thicket; perhaps it contained a traitor. Henceforward I will only discuss business at the top of an entirely unwooded hill."

All these reflections the senator made while walking in extreme agitation up and down the room, when the door opened, and Don Ruiz made his appearance.

"Senor Don Rufino," he said to him, "will you kindly come to the drawing-room? Our majordomo has brought most important news."

The senator started, and gave a suspicious glance; but nothing in Don Ruiz's open face caused him to suppose any hidden meaning.

"Is anything extraordinary happening, my dear Don Ruiz?" he asked, and then followed Don Ruiz to the saloon, where Dona Marianna, the marquis, and Jose Paredes were already assembled.

"What is the matter?" the senator asked; "Don Ruiz has startled me."

"You will be more startled when you know the events," the marquis answered. "Speak, majordomo."

"The Papazos have allied themselves with I know not how many other tribes of ferocious pagans."

"Caspita! that is serious," the senator said.

"Much more than you suppose; for the Indians are this time resolved to expel the white men for ever from Sonora," answered Paredes.

"Oh, oh," Don Rufino said; "they are undertaking a rude task."

"Laugh if you like, but it is so."

"I do not laugh, my worthy friend."

"In the first place, I am not your friend, senor," the majordomo said, roughly; "and next, it is probable that when you have seen the Indians at work your opinions about them will be modified."

"I never saw any wild red-skins, and Heaven preserve me from doing so. Still, I strongly suspect the inhabitants of this country of making them more formidable than they really are."

"You are wrong to have such an opinion, my friend, and if you remain any time with us will soon have proof of it," the marquis said.

"Are you going to remain here?" Dona Marianna asked, with terror.

"We have nothing to fear from the Indians," the marquis replied. "The rock on which my hacienda is built is too hard for them."

"Still, father, we cannot be too prudent," Don Ruiz observed.

"You are right, my son; and as I do not wish your sister to retain even a shadow of anxiety, we will immediately place ourselves in a position of defence, though it is unnecessary."

"Do not neglect any precaution," Paredes replied.

"Come, come," Don Rufino asked, "tell me who the person is that informed you?"

"It is enough that I know it, no matter the name of the man to whom I owe the information. If you fancy that it is a friend who warned me you will be near the truth."

"Permit me, senor," the senator answered. "You must not thus create an alarm in a family and then refuse to give proofs."

"My master knows me, senor; he knows that I am devoted to him."

"I do not doubt, senor, either your honesty or your truthfulness. Still, a thing so serious as you announce requires proofs."

"Stuff! stuff! the main point is to be on your guard."



"Yes, when we know whether we really ought to do so. Consequently, in my quality as a magistrate, I command you to reveal to me at once the name of the man who gave you these alarming news."

"Nonsense!" the majordomo said; "what good would it do if I were to tell you the name of an individual you do not know?"

"That is not the question. Be good enough to answer me, if you please."

"It is possible that you may be a magistrate, senor, and I do not care if you are. I recognise no other master but the senor marquis."

"Come, Paredes, answer," the marquis said. "I really do not understand you."

"Since you order me to speak, mi amo," the majordomo continued, "the person who told me of the insurrection is a white hunter, called Stronghand."

"Stronghand!" brother and sister exclaimed simultaneously.

"Is not that," the marquis asked, "the hunter to whom we already are so greatly indebted?"

"Yes, mi amo," the majordomo replied, musingly.

Although it was the first time the senator heard the hunter's name mentioned, by a kind of intuition he felt a species of emotion for which he could not account.

"Oh!" Dona Marianna cried, "we must place confidence in Stronghand's statements."

"Certainly we must," Don Ruiz added. "It is plain that he wished to warn us."

"But who is this man who inspires you with such profound sympathy?" the senator asked.

"A friend," Dona Marianna replied, warmly.

"And whom we all love," the marquis added, with emotion.

"Then you accept his bail for Paredes?"

"Yes; and believe me, my friend, that I shall not neglect the advice he gives me."

"Very good, senor; you will therefore permit me to remark that Senor Paredes' obstinacy in not revealing his name must fairly appear to me extraordinary."

"Senor Rufino, Paredes is an old servant who enjoys a very pardonable freedom, and believes that he has acquired the right of being believed on his word. Now," he added, "let us discuss the means to prevent a surprise. How many peons have you under your orders, Paredes?"

"Excellency, we have about eighty able to bear arms and do active duty."

"Oh, oh," the marquis said, "there are many more than we require; I see that it will be unnecessary to summon our miners from Quitovar."

"The more so," Paredes objected, "because Captain de Niza, whose position is far more exposed than ours, will already have enlisted them in his service."

"That is probable," the marquis answered, as he rose. "Go and carry out my orders without delay."

The majordomo bowed to his master, and went out.

"Will it please you, senor, to grant me a moment's interview?" the senator then said.

"I am at your orders, senor."

"Oh, do not disturb yourselves," the senator said, addressing Don Ruiz and his sister, who had risen to leave the room; "I have nothing secret to say to the marquis."

The young people sat down again.

"I confess to you that what this man has just said," Don Rufino continued,



"has greatly startled me. I should therefore wish, Don Hernando, to obtain your permission to leave you so soon as possible."

"Leave me!" the marquis replied, with amazement, "at this moment?"

"Yes. It seems as if coming events will be very serious. I am not a man of war, nor anything like it, for I am frightened at anything that bears a likeness to a quarrel."

"Senor Don Rufino, you are at liberty to act as you please. Still, I fear that the roads are not quite safe."

"I have thought of that; but I fancy that when I reach Arispe I shall have nothing to fear. Will you allow Don Senor Ruiz to escort me?"

"I can refuse you nothing, senor. My son will accompany you, since you do him the honour of desiring his escort."

"Yes," the senator continued, taking a side glance at Dona Marianna, who had let her head drop on her chest; "I wish to intrust Don Ruiz with an important letter for you."

"Why write? It would be far more simple to tell me what you wish in a couple of words."

"No! no! that is impossible," Don Rufino answered, with a smile that resembled a grimace; "that would demand too much time; moreover, dear sir, you know better than I do that there are certain things which can only be settled by ambassadors."

"As you please, senor. When do you propose to start?"

I frankly confess that, in spite of the regret I feel at leaving you, I fancy the sooner I set out the better."

"It is only ten o'clock," said Don Ruiz, as he rose. "By hurrying a little we can reach Arispe to-night."

"Famous! that is better. Allow me, Don Hernando, to take leave of you, as well as of your charming daughter, and pray accept my thanks for the noble hospitality I have received in your mansion."

"What! are you not afraid of travelling in the great heat of the day?"

"I only fear the sight of the Indians, and that fear is enough to make me forget all others. Excuse me, therefore, for leaving you so suddenly, but I feel convinced that I should die of terror if I heard the war-cry of those frightful savages echo in my ears."

Don Ruiz had left the room to give the requisite orders, and his sister followed him, after making a silent curtsy to the senator. The apprehension expressed by Don Rufino was greatly exaggerated, if not entirely fictitious; but he instinctively felt that the ground was beginning to burn beneath his feet at the hacienda, and he wanted to get away, to guard himself against the perils he foresaw from the ill success of his plot.

After a few moments, Don Ruiz returned to state that the escort had mounted, and that all was ready for a start. Don Rufino repeated his farewells to the marquis, but the latter would not let him depart before he had drunk, according to the hospitable fashion of the country, the stirrup-cup—that is to say, a glass of iced orangeade. Then all three left the room, for, in spite of the entreaties and objections of the senator, his host insisted on accompanying him to the patio and witnessing his departure. Two minutes later Don Rufino Contreras, accompanied by Don Ruiz, and followed by six confidential peons, well armed and mounted, left the hacienda, and took the direction of Arispe, which they reached at nightfall, after a rather fatiguing journey, it is true, but which, however, was not troubled by any accident of an alarming nature. The only thing the travellers noticed, and which proved to them how thoroughly the news of an approaching invasion of the Indians had spread along the



border, was the complete solitude of the country, which resembled a desert.

Don Rufino contemplated with stupor the desolate aspect of the country. When they reached the gates of Arispe they found them closed and guarded by powerful detachments of soldiers and civicos—a species of national militia, paid by the rich inhabitants to repress the devastation of the marauders who swarm on the Indian border. It was only after interminable debates and infinite precautions that the barrier guards at length consented to let the travellers pass.

Don Rufino possessed on the Plaza Mayor of Arispe a large and handsome mansion, at which he resided when business summoned him to Arispe. It took him more than an hour to reach it, owing to the numberless barricades.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### SERIOUS EVENTS.

ON the very day when Don Ruiz, after escorting Don Rufino Contreras to Hermosillo, returned to the hacienda, a courier arrived simultaneously with him. This man, who was mounted on an utterly exhausted steed, had apparently ridden a great distance, and was in an excessive hurry. No sooner had he reached the Toro than he was introduced into the marquis's study, with whom he remained shut up for a long time. Then the courier, on leaving the study, remounted his horse and set off again without speaking to a soul.

The marquis, whose face was usually imprinted with an expression of sad and resigned melancholy, had, after this interview, become of a cadaverous pallor; deep wrinkles furrowed his forehead, and his eyes stared wildly. He walked up and down for several hours in the yard in extreme agitation.

Dona Marianna, seated at a window of her boudoir, behind a muslin curtain, followed her father's movements, for she felt frightened at his state, and had a foreboding that she would have to share some of the sorrow which had fallen on him. A few minutes after a servant came to inform Dona Marianna that her father was awaiting her in the red chamber.

This red chamber, into which we have already had opportunity to introduce the reader, and which Don Hernando had not entered since the day when his brother was so inexorably disinherited by their father, was as cold and gloomy as when we saw it. When Dona Marianna reached the red chamber she found her father already there; he gave her a silent sign to take a seat. A few minutes after Don Ruiz entered, followed by Jose Paredes. The marquis then seated himself, and began in a feeble, trembling voice—

"My children, I have summoned you because we have to discuss matters of the deepest gravity. I have called to our council Paredes, and I trust you will not think that I have exceeded my rights in doing so."



The young people bowed their assent, Paredes placed himself by their side, and the marquis continued—

"My children, our family has for many years been tried by adversity. Hitherto, respecting the happy carelessness of childhood, I have sought to keep within my own breast the annoyances and grief with which I was incessantly crushed. Believe me, my children, I should have continued this conduct, and kept to myself all the cares and annoyances of such a life as I lead, but for a sudden, terrible, and irremediable misfortune which has fallen on me to-day."

The marquis stopped for a moment, overcome by the emotion which contracted his throat.

"Father," Don Ruiz replied, "you have ever been the best of parents to my sister and myself. Be assured that we have anxiously awaited this confidence, which has been so long delayed in the fear of causing us a temporary sorrow, for we hoped we might be able to assume a portion of the burden."

"My son," the marquis said, "I know your heart and your sister's. I am aware of the respectful affection you feel for me."

"Be kind enough then, father, to tell us what the matter is without further delay."

"Alas! my son," the marquis answered, "for some years past fortune has been treating our house with incomprehensible severity; everything is leagued against us, and our fortune, which was immense under the Spanish rule, has constantly diminished since the proclamation of Mexican independence. Still I had hoped a few days back that I should be able to render fortune more favourable to me. I foresaw a chance of saving some fragments of our old fortunes; but to-day I have attained the melancholy conviction that I am entirely ruined."

"Oh, things cannot be so bad as that, father!" Dona Marianna exclaimed.

"Yes, my children, we are ruined," the marquis continued, sadly. "We have lost everything."

"But how has such a great misfortune occurred?"

"Alas! in the same way as misfortunes always happen when fate has resolved on ruining a man. For a long time past business has been in a state of collapse, owing to the disastrous negligence of the government; and the news of the fresh revolt of the Indian mansos and bravos has raised the alarm of the merchants to the highest pitch. The panic is general among the bankers and persons whose capital is engaged in mines; several houses have already suspended payment, and thus everything has been paralysed at a single blow. Then, to complicate matters even more, a pronunciamiento has taken place in Mexico."

"Do you know this officially, father?"

"Unfortunately I cannot entertain the slightest doubt on the subject. For this reason, under such circumstances as the present, one thing inevitably happens. Creditors insist on the immediate repayment of their advances, while persons indebted to you, if they do not fail, defer payment so long that it is practically of no service. Now, the letters I received this morning, and they are numerous, may be divided into two classes: my debtors refuse to pay me, while my creditors, fearing a loss, have taken out writs against me, and if I do not pay them within eight days the round sum of 380,000 piastres I shall be declared bankrupt, imprisoned, expelled from my estate, and this hacienda, the last thing left us, will be put up to auction, and probably purchased for a trifle by one of the ex-vassals of our family, who has grown rich at our expense, and does not blush to take our place."



"Three hundred and eighty thousand piastres!" Don Ruiz muttered with stupor.

"That is the amount."

"How can we possibly get it together?"

"It is useless to dream of it for the present, my son. This hacienda alone is worth double. At other times I could have offered a mortgage, and as I have nearly 300,000 piastres owing to me, you see that I could have easily confronted this fresh stroke of fortune. But now it cannot be thought of; it will be better to give way, and allow our creditors to divide the spoil. I hope you do not suppose, Ruiz, that I have the intention of defrauding my creditors of the little that is left me."

"Oh no, father; but what do you propose doing?"

"Carai!" Paredes then said, "this is easily settled. I possess, through the liberality of the Moguer family, a rancho, which owes nothing to anybody. It is yours, *mi amo*. My mother and I can easily find another shelter. Well, if this wretched lodging is not so fine or handsome as this, it will, at any rate, afford you a shelter, and save you from applying for it to strangers. Is it so, excellency? Will you honour the old house of your servant by your presence?"

The marquis seemed to reflect for a moment, and then held out his hand to Paredes, who kissed it.

"Be it so, my friend. I accept your offer," he said. "Not that I intend to inconvenience you for any length of time, but merely during the few days I shall require to save, if possible, some fragments of my children's fortune from the general shipwreck."

"Do not think of us, father," Dona Marianna said, with emotion. "We are young, and can work."

Paredes was delighted with the acceptance of his offer.

"Oh, do not be frightened, *mi amo*," he said; "the old rancho is not so dilapidated and miserable as might be supposed. I trust, with the help of Heaven, that you will not be very uncomfortable there, and, at any rate, you will have no cause to fear the visits of certain parties."

"You are unjust, Paredes," the marquis replied. "Don Rufino Contreras, to whom you allude, is one of my best friends, and I must speak of his behaviour in the highest terms of praise."

"That is possible, *mi amo*, that is possible," the majordomo said, shaking his head with an air of conviction; "but if I may be permitted to express an opinion about that gentleman, I fancy we had better wait awhile before fully making up our minds about him."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, *mi amo*, really nothing. I have an idea, that is all."

"That reminds me, father, that on leaving me Don Rufino gave me a letter, which he begged me to deliver to you as soon as I reached the hacienda."

"Yes; he informed me of his intention of writing."

"Hum!" the majordomo said, between his teeth, but loudly enough for the marquis to hear him; "I always had a bad idea of men who prefer blackening paper to explaining themselves frankly in words."

During this aside, the marquis had opened and read the letter.

"This time, at any rate," he said, "Don Rufino cannot be accused of want of frankness, or of not explaining himself clearly. He warns me of the measures taken against me, and after showing me, in the most gentlemanly manner, the precarious nature of my position, he ends by offering me the means of escaping from it in the most honourable way; in one word, he asks for my



daughter's hand, and offers her a dowry of one and a half million piastres, besides liquidating my debts."

Dona Marianna was crushed by the blow so suddenly dealt her. The marquis continued with the bitter accent he had hitherto employed—"Such is the state we have reached, my children; we, the descendants of a race of worthies noble as the king, and whose escutcheon is unstained, have so fallen from our lofty social position that we are too greatly honoured by the offer of a marriage whose grandfather was our vassal. But such is the way of the world, and why blame it when we live in an age in which everything is possible?"

"What answer will you give to this strange letter, father?" Don Ruiz asked, anxiously.

Don Hernando drew himself up proudly.

"My son," he replied, "however poor I may be, I do not the less remain the Marquis de Moguer, the only thing, perhaps, which cannot be taken from me. I know the obligations I owe to the honour of my name. Your sister is free to accept or reject the offer made her. I do not wish, under any pretext, to influence her determination in so serious a matter. She is young, and has still many years to live; I have no right to enchain her existence with that of a man she does not love. She will reflect, and follow the impulse of her own heart. Whatever her resolution may be, I approve of it beforehand."

"Thanks, father," the maiden answered, gently. "And now grant me a last favour."

"What is it, my child?"

"I wish for a week before answering this request, for I am so surprised and confused that it would be impossible for me to form any resolution at present."

"Very good, my child; in eight days you will give me your answer. And now withdraw; but do you remain, Paredes; before leaving the hacienda for ever, I wish to make some arrangements in which your help will be necessary."

Brother and sister, after bowing respectfully to their father, slowly quitted this fatal chamber, which persons never entered save through a misfortune.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE TIGRERO.

DON RUIZ and his sister left the red chamber together, gloomy, sad, and despairing, and not daring to communicate their impressions, because they knew that they had nothing to hope from an exchange of conventional consolation. When they reached the hall whence ran the stairs leading to their different suites of rooms, Don Ruiz let loose his sister's arm, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Courage, Marianna," he said, gently.

"Are you leaving me, brother?" she remarked, with a slight tinge of reproach in her voice.



"Are you not going to your own room?" he asked her.

"And what do you intend doing?"

"To tell you the honest truth, sister," he replied, "after what has occurred in the red chamber, I feel in such a state of excitement that I want to breathe the fresh air; did I not, I fancy I should be ill."

"Do you propose going out, then?"

"In leaving you, my dear sister, it is my firm intention to saddle Santiago and ride about the country for two or three hours."

"If that be the case, Ruiz, I will ask you to do me a service."

"What is it?"

"Saddle Madrina at the same time."

"Your mare?"

"Yes."

"And are you going out too?"

"I want to pay a visit to my nurse, whom I have not seen for a long time. I am anxious to speak a few words with her."

"Will you go alone to the rancho?"

"Unless you give me the pleasure of your company."

"Do you doubt it, sister?"

"Yes and no, Ruiz."

"Why this reticence?"

"I will explain it to you, brother. To be frank with you, I want to see my nurse, and I may spend the night at the rancho; in the event of that happening, I do not wish you to make an attempt to dissuade me by entreaty or otherwise."

"Reflect, sister, that the country is not tranquil, and that you may incur danger in a wretched rancho, where any resistance would be impossible."

"I have thought of that, and calculated all the chances. But I repeat to you, I must go to the rancho, and may be obliged to pass there not only a night, but a day or two."

Don Ruiz reflected for a moment.

"Sister," he then said, "you are no ordinary woman, and everything you do is carefully calculated. Although you do not tell me the motives for this visit, I guess that they are serious, and hence will make no attempt to thwart your wishes. Act as you please, and I will do all you wish."

"Thank you, Ruiz," she answered, warmly; "I anticipated you would say that, for you understand me: my visit has a serious motive, as you have divined."

"Then I will go and saddle the horses," he replied, with a smile.

"Do so, brother," she replied, as she gently pressed his hand. "I will wait for you here."

"I only require five minutes."

The young man went out. Dona Marianna leant on the balustrade and fell into deep thought. Don Ruiz returned, leading the horses by the bridle; brother and sister mounted, and at once left the hacienda. It was about four in the afternoon; the great heat of the day was spent, the birds were singing gaily beneath the foliage; the sun, now level with the lowest branches, had lost much of its heat; and the coming breeze, which was beginning to rise, refreshed the atmosphere, and bore away the clouds of mosquitoes which had for several hours darkened the air. The young people galloped silently side by side, absorbed in their thoughts, and only taking absent glances at the splendid scenery unfolded around them as they advanced further into the country. They thus reached the rancho without exchanging a word.

Bouchaley, faithful to his friendship for Dona Marianna, had long before



announced her arrival to the inhabitants of the rancho, who had hurried out to welcome her. With a hurried glance, Marianna assured herself of the presence of her foster-brother, which seemed to cause her great satisfaction.

"Goodness! you here so late, nina?" the ranchero said, in his delight; "what blessed wind has blown you?"

"The desire of seeing you, *madresita*," the young lady answered, with a smile; "it is so long since I embraced you that I could not wait any longer."

"It is a good idea, nina," the ranchero said; "unfortunately it is late, and we shall only be able to converse with you for a few moments."

"How do you know, old father?" she replied, as she leaped off her horse and threw her arms round his neck; "who told you I should not spend the night at the rancho?"

"Oh, oh, you would not do us that honour, nina," the old man answered.

"You are mistaken, father, and the proof is that I ask my brother to leave me here and return alone to the hacienda."

"Then I am discharged," Don Ruiz said, laughingly.

"Yes, brother; but you have no cause of complaint, for I warned you."

"That is true; hence I do not complain, little sister; still, before we part, tell me at what hour I am to come and fetch you to-morrow?"

"Do not trouble yourself about that, Ruiz; Marianno will bring me home."

"And this time I shall not behave as the last, nina: may the Lord confound me if I lose sight of you for a moment," the tigrero said, as he took the horse's bridle to lead it to the corral.

"Will you be so cruel, Marianna," Ruiz observed, "as to force me thus to return at once?"

"No; I grant you an hour to rest and refresh yourself, but when that time has elapsed you will start."

"Agreed, little sister."

They entered the rancho: No Sanchez, with that hospitable speed all Mexican rancheros display, had already covered the table with pulque, mezcal, Catalonian refino, orangeade, and an infusion of tamarinds. The young people, thirsty from their long ride, and not wishing to grieve the worthy persons who received them so kindly, did honour to the refreshments thus profusely offered them. Don Ruiz, while teasing his sister about the strange fancy for spending the night at the rancho, though he felt convinced that she must have a very serious reason for it, conversed gaily according to his fashion, and displayed a dazzling wit which is easier in Mexico than elsewhere; for, owing to the natural intelligence of the people, no matter their rank, they are certain to understand. When day began to fall, the young gentleman took leave of the rancheros, mounted his horse, and started for the hacienda.

In Mexico, as in all intertropical countries, evening is the pleasantest part of the day: at that time the inhabitants are all in the open air. At night they sit in front of the rancho doors, conversing, singing, or dancing; two or three in the morning arrives before they dream of going to bed. But on this day, contrary to her habit when she paid her nurse a visit, Dona Marianna seemed fatigued; at times she had difficulty in checking a yawn, and her desire for rest was so evident that the nurse was first to invite her to retire. The young lady required no pressing, and after bidding the old folks good night entered the rancho and the room prepared for her. So soon as Marianna left the room, the old couple also retired to rest. As for Marianno, after making his usual tour of inspection round the rancho, he hung up a hammock under the portico, as he preferred sleeping in the open air to being shut up within the walls, which



the sun's heat had rendered stifling. An hour later all the inhabitants of the rancho were plunged into the deepest sleep.

Suddenly the tigrero felt a hand gently laid on his shoulder; he opened his eyes, and by the light of the stars, which were as brilliant as day, recognised Dona Marianna. The young man, who had thrown himself fully dressed upon the hammock, started up, and looked at his foster-sister anxiously.

"What is the matter with you, nina?" he asked, in evident alarm.

"Silence, Marianno!" she answered in a low voice, and laying her finger on her lips; all is quiet, at least I suppose so, but I wish to speak with you."

"Go on, tocaya," he replied, as he leaped from the hammock and folded it up.

"Yes, but I am sorry at having waked you; you were sleeping so soundly, that I looked at you for nearly a quarter of an hour ere I dared to disturb your rest; for sleep is such a blessed thing."

"Nonsense," he answered, with a laugh; "you were wrong, nina; we wood-rangers sleep so quickly that an hour is sufficient to rest us, and if I am not mistaken I have been lying down for more than two. Hence speak, nina; I am attentive, and shall not miss a word of what you say to me."

The young lady reflected for a moment.

"You love me, I think, Marianno?" she at length said, with a certain hesitation in her voice.

"Like a sister, nina," he said, warmly; "in truth, are we not tocayo and tocaya? Why ask such a question?"

"Because I want you to do me an important service."

"Me, nina? Carai! do not be alarmed; I am devoted to you body and soul, and whatever you may ask——"

"Do not pledge yourself too hastily, tocayo," she interrupted him, with a meaning laugh.

"A man cannot do that when he firmly intends to keep his promise."

"That is true; still there are things from which a man at times recoils."

"There may be such, nina, but I do not know them; however, explain your wishes to me frankly."

"I think, Marianno, that you are on friendly terms with the hunter called Stronghand?"

"Very intimate, nina; but why do you ask the question?"

"Is he an honest man?"

The tigrero looked at her.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked her.

"Why," she said, with considerable embarrassment, "I mean a man of heart—a man, in short, whose word may be taken."

Marianno became serious.

"Senorita," he said, "Stronghand saved my life under circumstances when my only hope was in Heaven. I have seen this man perform deeds of incredible courage and audacity, for the sole object of serving people who frequently did not feel the slightest gratitude to him. To me he is more than a friend—more than a brother; whatever he bade me I would do, even if I had to lay down the life he saved, and which belongs to him. Such, nina, is my opinion about the hunter called Stronghand."

The young lady gave a glance of pleasure.

"You are deeply attached to him?" she murmured.

"As I told you, he is more to me than a brother."

"And you often see him?"

"When I want him, or he wants me."

"Does he live in the neighbourhood, then?"



"A short time back he stayed several days at the rancho."

"And will he return?"

"Who knows?"

"What did he during his stay here?"

"I am not aware; I believe that he hunted, though I did not see a single head of game he had killed whilst he was here."

"Ah!" she said, pensively.

There was a silence. Marianno looked at her, somewhat surprised that she should have waked him for the sake of asking him such unimportant questions.

"Well," she continued, presently; "if you wanted to see Stronghand, do you know where to find him?"

"I think so."

"You are not certain?"

"Forgive me, nina, I am certain; we have a spot where we are safe to meet."

"But he might not be there."

"That might happen."

"What would you do in that case?"

"Go and seek him in another place, where I should be sure of finding him."

"Ah! and where is that?"

"At the village he inhabits."

"What village is that? I know of none in the vicinity."

"Pardon me, nina; there is one."

"A long way from here, I presume?"

"Only a few leagues."

"And what is this pueblo?"

"A village of the Papazos."

"What?"

"Yes, I have forgotten to tell you that. Although he is a white man, Stronghand has, for reasons I am ignorant of, joined the Indians, and been adopted by one of their most powerful tribes."

"That is singular," the young lady murmured.

"Is it not?" the tigrero replied, understanding less than ever the object of the conversation.

The maiden shook her head coquettishly, and seemed to form a sudden resolution.

"Marianno," she said, "I asked you to do me a favour."

"Yes, nina, and I answered that I was ready to do it."

"That is true; you are still of the same mind?"

"Why should I have altered it?"

"This is what I want of you."

"Speak."

"I wish to see Stronghand."

"Very good; when?"

"At once."

"What?" he asked, in amazement.

"Do you refuse?"

"I do not say that, but——"

"There is a but, then?"

"There always is one."

"Let me hear yours."

"It is long past midnight."

"What matter is that?"

"Not much, I allow."



"Well, what next?"

"It is a long journey."

"Our horses are good."

"We risk not finding the hunter at our usual meeting-place."

"We will push on to his village."

The tigreiro looked at her attentively.

"You have a great need to see Stronghand in that case?" he asked.

"Most extreme."

"It is more serious than you suppose, senorita."

"Why so?"

"Hang it! it is not so easy to enter an Indian village."

"But you do so."

"That is true; but I am alone, and well known."

"Well, I will go on after you; that is all."

"Are you aware that the Indians have revolted?"

"That does not concern you, as you are a friend of theirs."

Marianno shook his head.

"You ask a very difficult thing again, tocaya," he said, "in which you run a great risk."

"Yes, if I fail; but I shall succeed."

"It would be better to give up this excursion."

"Confess, then, at once," she said, impatiently, "that you do not wish to keep the promise you made me."

"You are unjust to me; I am only trying to dissuade you from an enterprise which you will repent when it is too late."

"That is my business, I repeat, Marianno," she continued, with a marked stress in her words; "it is not to gratify a caprice that I wish to see the hunter. I have reasons of the utmost importance for wishing to speak with him; and, to tell you all, he urged me to summon him under certain circumstances, and told me I need only apply to you in order to find him. Are you satisfied now? Will you adhere to your doubts, and still refuse to accompany me?"

The young man had listened to Dona Marianna with earnest attention. When she had ended, he replied, "I no longer hesitate, nina; as things are so, I am bound to obey you. Still, I beg you not to make me responsible for any events that may happen."

"Whatever may occur, my kind Marianno, be assured that I shall be grateful to you for the immense service you have rendered me."

"And you wish to start at once?"

"How far have we to ride?"

"Some ten or twelve leagues."

"Oh, that is nothing."

"Not on a regular road; but I warn you that we shall be compelled to follow hardly visible wild beast tracks."

"The night is clear; we shall have sufficient light to guide us, so let us start."

"If you wish it," the young man answered.

A few minutes later they left the rancho at a gallop. It was two in the morning; and the moon, which was at its full, lit up the landscape as in bright day.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE EXCURSION.

As we have already said, Dona Marianna, although still so young, was gifted with an ardent soul and an energetic character, which the unusual dangers of a border life had, so to speak, unconsciously ripened. In life these select organisations do not know themselves; events alone, by exciting their living strength, reveal to them what they are capable of at a given moment, by urging them bravely to endure the attack of malignant fortune, and to contend resolutely with their adversary. When the marquis, forced by the necessities of his unhappy condition, had a frank explanation with his children, and confessed to them into what difficulties he was suddenly thrown, Dona Marianna had listened to him with the most sustained attention. Then, by degrees, a species of revolution took place in her. Stronghand's words reverted to her mind, and she had a vague idea that he could avert the danger that was suspended over her father's head.

On recapitulating all that had occurred to her since her departure from Rosario—the help the hunter had rendered her on various occasions with unexampled devotion—the conversation she had held with him a few days previously, and the promise she had made him—it appeared evident to her that Stronghand, better informed than perhaps the marquis himself was about the machinations of his enemies, held in his hands the means of saving the Moguer family, and parrying the blows which were about to be dealt them in the dark.

Then, full of hope, and confiding in the promises of this man, who had never made his appearance except to prove his devotion to her, her resolution was spontaneously formed, and without informing any one of the project she had conceived, for fear lest an effort might be made to dissuade her, she went to her nurse's rancho, in order to obtain an interview with the hunter by the agency of her foster-brother.

Marianno did not think, and consequently did not understand what he supposed was a girl's fancy. Accustomed since childhood to yield to all the wishes of his foster-sister, and obey her as a slave, he had on this occasion done what she desired without trying to account for such an unusual excursion, so happy did he feel at obliging her. At the same time he felt a lively pleasure at accompanying her, and thus passing a few hours in her company. We must not mistake the feelings that animated the tigrero for Dona Marianna. He loved his foster-sister with his whole soul, and would have gladly died for her; but this feeling, lively as it was, had nothing personal or interested about it; it was merely friendship, but a friendship. Hence the tigrero, comprehending the responsibility weighing on him, rode on, as is commonly said, with his beard on his shoulder, carefully examining the bushes, listening to the desert sounds, and ready, on the slightest alarm, bravely to defend the girl who had placed herself under his guard. Suddenly Marianno pointed out to her a gentle eminence forming a bend of the river, on the top of which the fugitive gleams of an expiring fire could be seen at intervals.



"That is where we are going," he said.

"Then we have only a few minutes' ride, and it is useless to hurry our horses."

"You are mistaken, nina. Not only is the track we are following very winding, and one which will detain us, but this hill is at least two leagues distant."

"Can we not cut across country, and thus shorten the distance?"

"Heaven forbid, nina! We should then get into trembling prairies."

"I trust to you in that case, Marianno."

"Permit me to remark, my dear tocaya, that I did not say certainly that we should find Stronghand at this bivouac."

"What did you tell me, then?"

"Simply that we might hope to meet him here, because it is the spot where he generally encamps when hunting in these parts."

"Still, as we can perceive the flame of that watch-fire——"

"We have yet to learn whether this fire has been kindled by Stronghand or some other hunter."

"Then probably we shall not find the hunter at the encampment?"

"I do not say that either, nina," Marianno answered, with a laugh.

"But what do you mean?" the young lady said.

"Do not be angry, tocaya; I may be mistaken. If Stronghand is not here, perhaps we may find a hunter who will tell us where he is."

"Why not an Indian?"

"This fire is not an Indian fire."

"That is not exactly what you said to me. Go on, however."

"The Indians, when they camp on the white man's border, never light a fire for fear of revealing their presence; or if compelled to light one in order to cook their food, they are most careful to diminish the flame, in the first place by digging a deep hole in the ground."

"But, my friend, that fire is scarce visible."

"That is true; but still it is sufficiently so for us to have perceived it a long distance off, at a spot which, under present circumstances, would entail the surprise and consequent death of the imprudent men who lit it if they were Indians instead of hunters."

"Excellently reasoned, companero, and like a man accustomed to a desert life," a rough though good-humoured voice suddenly said a few yards from them.

Marianno did not lose his head under these critical circumstances, but with a movement swift as thought raised his rifle and covered a man who was standing by the side of a thicket.

"Hold, compadre!" the stranger continued, not at all disturbed by the tigrero's hostile demonstration; "pay attention to what you are about. A thousand fiends! do you know that you run the risk of killing a friend?"

"I fancy I recognise that voice," said Marianno; "you are Whistler."

"All right, you remember now," the Canadian said, with a laugh.

"Are you quite sure of this man?" asked Marianna, in a low, quick voice.

"He is a Canadian hunter or trapper. He has all the defects of the race, but at the same time all its qualities."

"I will believe you, for his countrymen are generally regarded as honest men. Ask him what he was doing on the skirt of the track."

Marianno obeyed.

"I was attending to my business," Whistler replied, with a grin; "and pray what may you be doing, so poorly accompanied at this hour of the night, when the Indians have taken the field?"



"I am travelling, as you see."

"Yes; but every journey has an object, I suppose."

"It has."

"Well, I do not see what you and yours can achieve by continuing in that direction."

"Still, we are going to do so till we have found the man we are in search of."

"I will not ask you your destinations, although I may perhaps have a right to do so. Still, I fancy you would act more wisely in turning back than in obstinately going on."

"I am not able to do so."

"Why not?"

"Because I have not the command of the expedition, and I cannot undertake such a responsibility."

"Ah, who is the chief, then? I only see two persons."

"You seem to forget, senor," Dona Marianna said, joining in the conversation for the first time, "that one of these two persons is a female."

"Of course she must command," the trapper answered, with a courteous bow; "pray excuse me, madam."

"I the more willingly do so because I hope to obtain from you important information about the object of the journey we have undertaken, perhaps somewhat too carelessly, in these desolate regions."

"I shall be too happy to be agreeable to you, my lady, if it be in my power."

"Forgive me, sir," she continued; "I am in search of a hunter with whom grave reasons force me to desire an immediate interview."

"Do you know him personally, madam?"

"Yes, and am under great obligations to him. He is called Stronghand."

"You wish to have an immediate interview with Stronghand?" the trapper asked.

"Yes, I repeat, senor, for reasons of the highest importance."

"In that case you are Dona Marianna de Moguer."

"What!" she exclaimed, in surprise, "you know my name?"

"I am an intimate friend of Stronghand. Without entering into any details that might justly offend you, my friend told me that you might perchance come and ask for him at our camp-fire."

"He knew it, then," she murmured; "but how did he learn it?"

"He doubtless hoped it would be so, madam," he answered.

"Good heavens!" she continued, "what does this mean?"

"I am at your orders, madam, and believe me that you will receive a proper reception, even though my friend does not happen to be there at the moment."

"Good heavens!" she murmured, clasping her hands in grief.

"Warned through me, madam, Stronghand will be back by daybreak."

"Go, then, and may Heaven requite you for the good-will and courtesy you show me."

Whistler bowed respectfully to the young lady, took his rifle under his arm, and soon disappeared in the forest.



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE HUNTER'S CAMP.

It was no great distance to the bivouac, and the travellers reached it half an hour after Whistler. Still, though this period was so short, the worthy Canadian had profited by it to erect for the young lady, who thanked him by a smile, a jacal of branches, under which she found a shelter as comfortable as desert life permits.

Orders had probably been given beforehand by Whistler, for the sentinels allowed the two travellers to pass unquestioned through a breach in the entrenchments, which was immediately closed after them again.

"You are welcome among us, senora," said the Canadian with a respectful bow; "in this jacal, which no one will enter save yourself."

"I thank you, senor, but will you keep your promise?"

"Senorita, two horsemen have already set out to fetch Stronghand, but I repeat that he cannot be here for some hours; now, if you will accept the humble refreshment prepared for you——"

"I only require rest, senor; still, I am not the less obliged to you."

"You are mistress here, madam."

The young lady smiled, pressed her foster-brother's hand, and entered the jacal. So soon as Dona Marianna had let fall after her the blanket which formed the doorway, the tigrero quietly removed his zarape from his shoulders and laid it on the ground.

"What is that for, comrade?" Whistler asked.

"You see, compadre, I am making my bed. Two sentries are better than one; besides, you know me, do you not? Although I place the utmost confidence in you, I will not surrender the guardianship of my tocaya to another man."

"As you please," the trapper said, with a laugh.

And he left him at liberty to make his arrangements as he pleased. The tigrero, though he knew most of the hunters, or perhaps because he knew them, did not wish to leave his foster-sister unprotected among these reckless men, who, accustomed to the utter licence of a desert life, might, under the influence of strong liquors, forget the sacred duties of hospitality and insult Dona Marianna.

Whistler went off with a laugh, and lay down by the side of his comrades. As we have already said, the night was far advanced when Dona Marianna and her travelling companion reached the camp of the hunters; a few hours at the most separated them from sunrise; and the young lady, who at first resolved to spend these hours awake, overcome by fatigue, had yielded to sleep, and enjoyed a calm and refreshing rest.

The dawn was just breaking, and striping the horizon with wide vermilion bands. As she arose, the sharp and rather cold morning breeze rustled softly through the branches; the flowers that enamelled the prairie raised themselves, and expanded the corollas to receive the first sunbeams; the numberless streams, whose silvery waters made their way through the tall grass, murmured over



the white and grey pebbles as they bore their tribute to the Rio Bravo del Norte.

The maiden, refreshed by the rest she had enjoyed, felt herself new-born as she breathed the first exhalations of the flowers and the sharp odour which is found in the desert alone. Without venturing to quit the jacal, in front of which the tigrero was lying, she surveyed the surrounding landscape. Suddenly the girl uttered an exclamation of delight, for she noticed a band of horsemen fording the stream, and apparently coming in the direction of the hill. At the cry his foster-sister uttered the tigrero bounded to his feet and stood by her side, rifle in hand, ready to defend her if necessary.

"Good morning, todayo," she said to him.

"Heaven keep you, nina," he replied, with a shade of anxiety. "Have you slept well?"

"I could not have done so better, Marianno."

"All right then; but why did you utter that cry?"

"I cried out, my friend, and scarce know why."

"Ah, yes—stay; look at those horsemen coming up at full speed."

"Carai! how they gallop! They will be here within half an hour."

"Do you think that Stronghand is among them?"

"I suppose so, nina."

In the meanwhile the camp was aroused; the hunters were yawning, and turning to their daily avocations; some led their horses to the watering-place, others kindled the fires; some cut the wood requisite to keep them up, while two or three of the older men acted as cooks, and got breakfast ready for the party. The camp changed its appearance in a minute; it lived the nervous, agitated life of the desert, in which each man performs his task with the feverish speed of persons who are aware of the value of time, and do not wish to lose it. The young lady, at first surprised by the cries, laughter, and unaccustomed movements that prevailed around her, began to grow used to it. A sharp challenge of "Who goes there?" suddenly made her raise her head.

"A friend!" a voice she at once recognised answered from without.

Suddenly a band of horsemen entered the camp, at their head being Stronghand. The young man dismounted, and after exchanging a few words with Whistler he went straight up to the maiden, who was standing motionless in the doorway of the jacal. Stronghand was not alone; several persons accompanied him, among them being Thunderbolt and Dona Esperanza; the rest were confidential Indian servants.

"Permit me, senorita," said Stronghand, "to present to you my mother, Dona Esperanza, and my father; both love you, though they do not know you, and insisted on accompanying me."

The maiden, blushing with joy at this delicate attention on the part of the hunter, who thus placed their interview beneath the safeguard of his father and mother, replied with emotion—"I am delighted, senor, with this kind inspiration of your heart."

Dona Esperanza and the sachem embraced the girl, who, at once ashamed and joyous at the friendship of these persons, whose exterior was at once so imposing and so venerable, knew not how to respond to their caresses and the kindness they evinced to her. In the meanwhile the hunters had raised, with great skill and speed, a tent, under which the four persons were at once protected from the curious glances of the persons who surrounded them. Dona Marianna was greatly surprised to see that this lady, whom she was bound to suppose an entire stranger, was perfectly acquainted with all that related to her family, and knew her father's affairs better than she did herself; her amazement



increased when Dona Esperanza explained in the fullest details the reasons that occasioned her presence in the hunter's camp, and the precarious position to which the Marquis de Moguer was reduced.

"I could add many more surprising things, my dear girl," Dona Esperanza continued with a smile, "but I do not wish to fatigue you at present; sufficient for you to know that we really take an interest in your family, and that it will not be our fault if your father is not soon freed from all his cares."

"Oh, how good you are, madam!" the young lady exclaimed, warmly; "how can I have merited such lively interest on your part?"

"That must not trouble you at all, my dear girl; the step you have taken to-day to come to your father's assistance, and the confidence you have placed in my son, are for us proofs of the loftiness of your feelings and the purity of your heart."

The conversation went on thus between the two ladies on a footing of frank friendliness, until the moment when Stronghand came to interrupt it by stating that breakfast was ready, and that they were only waiting for them to sit down. The tigrero and the Canadian had both been invited to share the meal, but they declined the invitation under the pretext that they did not like to eat with persons so high above them in rank, but in reality because the worthy wood-rangers preferred breakfasting without ceremony. Stronghand did not press them, and allowed them to do as they pleased.

The young lady seated herself between Thunderbolt and Dona Esperanza, Stronghand sat down opposite to her, and two men-servants waited. In spite of the agreeable surprise which the impromptu comfort of this repast, prepared for her alone, caused her, the young lady did not at all display her surprise, but she ate heartily and gaily, thus thanking her hosts for the delicate attentions they showed her. When the dainties were placed on the table and the meal was drawing to a close, Stronghand bowed to Dona Marianna.

"Senorita," he said, with a smile, "before we begin a serious conversation, which might, at this moment, appear to you untimely, be kind enough to permit my mother to tell us a charming Indian legend."

Dona Marianna was at first surprised by this proposition, made, without any apparent motive, at the close of a lively conversation; but imagining that the hunter's remarks concealed a serious purpose, and that the legend, under its frivolous aspect, would entail valuable results for her, she answered with her sweetest smile—"I shall listen with the greatest pleasure to the narrative the senora is about to tell us, because my nurse, who is of Indian origin, was wont to lull me to sleep with these legends, which have left a deep and most agreeable impression on my mind."



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE LEGEND.

DONA ESPERANZA exchanged a look with the sachem, and after reflecting a moment, as if recalling her ideas, she said to Dona Marianna, in her gentle, sympathising voice—"My dear girl, before beginning my narrative, I must inform you that I belong to the Aztec race, and am descended in a direct line from the kings of that people. Hence the story you are about to hear, though simple in its form, is completely exact, and has dwelt among us intact for generations. I trust," she added, with a stress, "that it will interest you."

Then turning to one of the criados who stood motionless behind the guests, she said—"The quipos."

The criado went out, and almost immediately returned with a bag of perfumed tapir skin, which he handed his mistress with a bow. The latter opened it, and drew out several cords plaited of different coloured threads, divided at regular distances by knots mingled with shells and beads. These cords are called quipos, and are employed by the Indians to keep up the memory of events that have occurred during a long course of years, and thus represent books. Still, it requires a special study to understand these quipos, and few people are capable of deciphering them, the more so as the Indians, who are very jealous about keeping their historical secrets, only permit a small number of adepts to learn the explanation,, which renders any knowledge of Indian history almost impossible for white men. Dona Esperanza, after attentively examining the quipos, selected one, replaced the others in the bag, and letting the knots of the rope glide through her fingers as a monk does his beads when telling his rosary, she began her narrative.

For fear of injuring this story, whose truth cannot be doubted, and which we ourselves heard told in an atepetl of the Papazos, we will leave it with all its native rudeness, without attempting to adorn it with flowers of European metaphors, which, in our opinion, would deprive it of its peculiar character. Dona Esperanza spoke as follows:—

"At a certain period of the year," she said, while beginning to feel the quipos, which served her, as it were, as a book, "long before the appearance of white men on the red territory, a numerous band of Chichimeques and Toltèques, who originally dwelt at the lakes, becoming dissatisfied, resolved to emigrate to the south-west in pursuit of the buffaloes, and carried out their resolve.

"At Salt Lake they divided, and those who remained continued to bear their primitive name, while the others, for an unknown motive, assumed that of Comanches. These Comanches, more enterprising than their brothers, continued their journey till they reached the banks of the Rio Gila, where they encamped and divided again. One band, which resolved not to go further, was christened by the others, who determined to press on, the 'Great Ears'; but the whites who first discovered them called them 'Opatas.' The remainder of the band continued to march in the same direction, and found the Rio Bravo



del Norte at the mouth of the Rio Puerco. They had only two principal chiefs left, and gave themselves the name of Neu-ta-che, which means, 'those who reach the river's mouth.' One of the chiefs had an only son, and the other a lovely daughter, and the young people loved each other. But this raised the anger of the father of the unhappy girl to such a height that he made his band arm and prepare to fight. But the father and the young man crossed the Rio Gila, and buried themselves with their band in the territory afterwards called by the white men Senora or Sonora, where they settled, and continued to reside peacefully until the period when the whites, ever in search of new lands, arrived there in their turn, and after many cruel wars succeeded in gaining possession of the country.

"The Comanches had founded several towns in Sonora, in accordance with their constant habit, in the neighbourhood of the gold and silver mines they discovered, and began to work. One of their towns, perhaps the richest and most populous, had for its chief a warrior justly renowned for his wisdom in council and valour in the combat. This chief was called Quetzalmalin—that is to say, the 'Twisted Feather.' His nobility was great, and very ancient; he justly declared that he was descended in a direct line from Acamapichtzin, first king of Mexico, whose hieroglyphic he retained on the totem of his tribe, through that veneration which our fathers displayed for their ancestors. This hieroglyphic, which his descendants have preciousy retained, is composed of a hand grasping a number of reeds, which is the literal translation of the name of the noble chief of the race. Twisted Feather had a daughter, eighteen summers old, lovely and graceful; her name was Ova, and she ran over the prairie grass without bending it; gentle, pensive, and timid as the virgin of the first loves, her black eyes had not yet been fixed on one of the warriors of the tribe, who all sought to please her.

"Ova wore a tunic of water-green colour, fastened round her waist by a wampum-belt, with a large golden buckle. When she danced before her father, the old man's forehead became unwrinkled, and a sunbeam passed into his eyes. Her father had often told her that it was time for her to marry, but Ova shook her head with a smile; she was happy, and the little bird that speaks to the heart of maidens had not yet sung to her the gentle strains of love.

"Still a moment arrived when Ova lost all her careless gaiety. The young girl, so laughing and so wild, became suddenly pensive and dreamy—she loved.

"Ova went to find her father. The chief at this moment was presiding over the great council of the nation in the great medicine calli. The maiden advanced, and knelt respectfully before her father.

"'What is it, my daughter?' the chief said, as he passed his hand gently through her long hair, which was fine as aloe threads.

"'My father,' she replied, looking down modestly, 'I love, and am beloved.'

"'My daughter, what is the name of the chief who is so happy that your choice should have fallen on him?'

"'He is not a chief, my father; he is, perchance, one of the most obscure warriors of the tribe, although he is one of the bravest. He works in the gold mine that belongs to you.'

"The chief frowned, and a flash of anger sparkled in his glance.

"'My father,' the maiden continued, as she embraced his legs, 'if I did not marry him I should die.'

"The chief gazed at his daughter for a moment, and saw her so sad and resigned that pity entered his heart. He, too, loved his daughter—his only child; for the Master of Life had called away the others to the happy hunting-grounds. The aged man did not wish his daughter to die.



"'You shall marry the man you love,' he said to her.

"'Do you promise it to me on the sacred totem of the nation, father?'

"'On the sacred totem of the nation I promise it. Speak, therefore, without fear; what is the name of the man you love?'

"'He is called the Clouded Snake, father.'

"The old man sighed.

"'He is very poor,' he muttered.

"'I am rich enough for both.'

"'Be it so. You shall marry him, my daughter.'

Ova rose, sparkling with joy and happiness, bowed to the assembly, and left the medicine lodge.

Clouded Snake was poor, it is true—even very poor, since he was constrained to work in the gold mine; but he was young, he was brave, and was considered the handsomest of all the warriors of his age.

Tall, robust, and muscular, Clouded Snake formed as complete a contrast with Ova, who was pale and frail, as a noble buffalo does with a graceful antelope. Perhaps their love emanated from this contrast.

The young man, though he was so poor, found means to give his betrothed perfumes of grizzly bears' grease, necklaces of alligator's teeth, and wampum girdles.

The young people were happy. On the eve of the marriage Clouded Snake laid at Ova's feet buckles of gold and two bracelets of shells, mingled with beads of pure gold.

Ova accepted these presents with a smile, and said to her betrothed, as she left him—

"'Farewell; we part to-day to see each other to-morrow, and to-morrow we shall be united for ever.'

On the next day Clouded Snake did not come. Ova waited for several months; Clouded Snake did not reappear.

In vain, by the chief's orders, was the young man sought for throughout the country; no one had seen him, no one had heard speak of him.

Clouded Snake no longer existed, except in the heart of Ova.

She wept for him, and people tried to make her believe that he had gone to fight the white men; but Ova shook her head, and wiped away her tears.

Forty times did the snow cover the summit of the mountains, and yet it had been impossible to clear up the mystery of Clouded Snake's disappearance.

One day some labourers at work in the gold mine which had belonged to Ova's father, and was now her property, while going far down an old gallery which had been abandoned for a long time, exhumed a corpse as miraculously preserved as the mummies of the *teocallis* are in their bandages.

The warriors flocked up to see this strange corpse, clothed in a dress belonging to another age, and no one recognised it.

Ova, who was then old, and who, to please her father, had married the great chief of his nation when her last hope expired, went with her husband to the spot where the corpse was exposed to the sight of visitors.

Suddenly she started, and tears darted from her eyes; she had recognised Clouded Snake, as handsome as on the day when she left him with the hope of a speedy reunion. She, on the other hand, aged and bowed down more by grief than years, was weak and tottering.

Ova wished that the corpse of the man whom she had been on the point of marrying, and whom the evil spirit had torn from her, should be restored to the mine from which it had been removed after forty years. The mine, by the



orders of the chief's wife, although extremely rich, was abandoned and shut up. "Ova ordered a hieroglyphic to be carved on the stone that covers the body of her betrothed, which may be thus translated :—' This sepulchre is without a body ; this body is without a sepulchre ; but by itself it is a sepulchre and a body.'

"Such," Dona Esperanza added, as she finished the legend and laid down the quipos, "is the story of the lovely Ova, daughter of the great chief Twisted Feather, and of Clouded Snake the miner, just as it occurred, and just as Ova herself ordered it to be preserved by a special quipos for future ages."

Dona Esperanza stopped, and there was a moment's silence.

"Well, senorita," the sachem asked, "has the legend interested you?"

"Through its simplicity it is most touching, senor," the young lady answered. "Still, there is something vague and unsettled about the whole story, which impairs its effect."

Thunderbolt smiled gently.

"You find, do you not, that we are not told the precise spot where the events of the narrative occurred, that Sonora is very large, and that the town in which Twisted Feather commanded is not sufficiently indicated?"

"Pardon me, senor," the young lady remarked, with a blush, "such geographical notions, though doubtless very useful in settling the spot where events have occurred, interest me very slightly. What I find incomplete is the story itself; the rest does not concern me."

"More so than you suppose, perhaps, senorita," the sachem remarked; "but pray be good enough to state your objections more fully."

"Excuse me, senor, but I have not yet recovered from the surprise which the events that have occurred during the last few hours have occasioned me, and I explain myself badly, in spite of my efforts."

"What do you mean, senorita, and to what events are you referring?"

"To those which are taking place at this very moment. Having started from home to ask an interview of a wood-ranger, whom I naturally supposed encamped in the open air, and shared the life of privations of his fellows, I meet, on the contrary, persons who overwhelm me with attentions, and, under an Indian appearance, conceal all the refinements of the most advanced civilisation."

"You are going too far, my dear child," Dona Esperanza replied, as she tenderly embraced her; "what you have seen here ought not to surprise you. My husband is one of the principal chiefs of the great Confederation of the Papazos; but he and I, in other times, lived the life of white men. When we withdrew to the desert, we took with us our civilised habits, and that is the entire mystery. As for the step you have taken, it has nothing that is not most honourable to you."

"I thank you for these kind remarks, and the interpretation you are pleased to give to my folly."

"Do not regret it, senorita," said Thunderbolt; "perhaps it has helped your father's affairs more than you suppose."

"As for the story of Ova," Dona Esperanza continued, with a gentle smile, "this is how it ended: The poor woman died of despair a few days after the discovery of the man she ought to have married, and whom she had held in such tender memory for so long a time. At her last hour she expressed a desire to be united in death to the man from whom she had been separated in life. This last wish was carried out. The two betrothed repose side by side in the mine, which was at once closed again, and no one has dreamed of opening it up to the present day."



"I thank you, senora, for completing your narrative. Still," Marianna said, with a sigh, "this gold mine must, in my opinion, be very poor, since the Spaniards, when they seized the country, did not attempt to work it."

"Not at all, my dear child; on the contrary, it is excessively rich. But Ova's secret has been so well kept that the Spaniards remained in ignorance of its existence."

The two ladies were by this time alone, as the sachem and his son had left the tent.

"It is strange," the maiden murmured, answering her own thoughts rather than Dona Esperanza's remark.

The earnestness with which the lady insisted on referring to the legend astounded and interested her. A secret foreboding warned her that the story had a hidden object, whose importance still escaped her, though she was burning to discover it. Dona Esperanza attentively followed in her face the various feelings that agitated her, and were reflected in her expressive face as in a mirror. She continued—"This is why the mine was not discovered when the Spaniards seized the town where it was situated. It had been stopped up for a very long time. The old inhabitants were killed or expelled by the conquerors; and those who escaped were careful not to reveal this secret to their oppressors. The latter destroyed the town, and built an immense hacienda over its mines."

"But—pardon me for questioning you thus, senora—how have all these facts come to your knowledge?"

"For a very simple reason, my dear child. Ova was my ancestress, and the knowledge of this mine is consequently a family secret for us. I am, perhaps, the only person in the world, except my husband, who at the present day knows its exact position."

"Yes, I understand you," the young lady said, becoming very pensive.

"Still, you are trying to discover, are you not, my dear child," the old lady continued, kindly interrogating her, "why, instead of letting you speak of the important matters that brought you here, my son urged you to ask this story of me; and why, without pity for your filial sorrow, I consented to do so; and why, now that it is ended, I am anxious for you to learn the minutest details?"

The girl hid her face in the old lady's bosom, and burst into tears.

"Yes," she said, "you have understood me, madam, and pray pardon me."

"Pardon you for what, my dear child? for loving your father? On the contrary, you are quite right. But yours is no common nature, my child: though we have only been acquainted for a few hours, you have sufficiently appreciated my character, I think, to recognise the interest I take in you."

"Yes, yes, I believe you, madam; I must believe you."

"Well, console yourself, my dear girl; do not weep thus, or I shall be forced to follow your example; and I have still some details to add to this interminable story."

The maiden smiled through her tears. "Oh, you are so kind, madam," she answered.

"No, I love you, that is all, and," she added, with a sigh, "I have done so for a long time."

Dona Marianna gazed at her with amazement.

"Yes, that surprises you," she continued, "and I can well understand it. But enough of this subject for the present, my darling, and let us return to what I wanted to say to you."

"Oh, I am listening to you, madam."



"I will now tell you where Ova's town stood, and its name. It was called Cibola."

"Cibola!" the girl exclaimed.

"Yes, dear child, the very spot where the Hacienda del Toro was afterwards built by your ancestor, the Marquis de Moguer. Now do you understand me?"

Without replying, Dona Marianna threw herself into the old lady's arms, who pressed her tenderly to her bosom.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### KIDD REAPPEARS.

KIDD had left the atepetl of the Papazos with rage in his heart, and revolved in his mind the most terrible schemes of vengeance. Not that the bandit had in his gangrened heart any sensitive chord which noble sentiment could cause to vibrate; to him it was a matter of the slightest importance that he had been publicly branded and expelled like the lowest scoundrel; humiliation glided over him without affecting him, and what most enraged him was to see the fortune dried up which Don Marcos de Niza had momentarily flashed before his greedy eyes, and which he hoped, by dissimulation and treachery, to invest in his capacious pocket in the shape of gold ounces.

He very sadly and despairingly proceeded along the road to the Real de Minas, not knowing yet whether he should enter the pueblo or push further on and seek fortune elsewhere, when his attention was attracted to the left hand of the road he was following by an unusual and continuous undulation of the tall grass.

He waited a quarter of an hour; then the grass parted, and the bandit perceived three horsemen coming towards him, entirely dressed in black. With that peculiar scent scoundrels have for detecting policemen, Kidd did not deceive himself; he at once recognised the three persons as belonging to the noble corporation of Alguazils. A fourth, also dressed in black, in whose ugly features an expression of bestial craft and wickedness seemed to be reflected, was evidently the leader of the party—an Alguazil mayor, a race of rapacious vultures, without heart or entrails; a manso Indian, dressed in torn trousers, and with bare head, arms, and legs, was running in front of the others, and evidently acting as guide.

"Hold, Jose!" the most important of the men shouted. "Hold, Jose! mind you do not lead us astray, scoundrel; we must arrive this night at the Real de Minas of Quitovar, whither important business summons us."

"You would arrive there before two o'clock, excellency," the Indian answered, with a crafty laugh, "if instead of riding at a foot pace you would consent to give your mule the spurs."

"*Vulga mi dios!*" the first speaker said, angrily; "what will my honourable client, El Senor Senator Don Rufino Contreras, say?"



"Nonsense! you will arrive soon enough to torture honest people."

"What do you dare to say, scoundrel?" the bailiff exclaimed, raising the chicote he held in his hand.

"Take care, senor; though you call me Jose, and treat me no better nor worse than a brute, we are no longer in one of your civilised towns, but on the prairie; here I have my foot on my native heath, and will not put up with the slightest insult."

And saying this the man flashed in the bailiff's terrified face a long knife, whose blue blade had a sinister lustre.

"You are mad, Jose—quite mad," the other answered; "I never intended to insult you."

"That will do," the Indian said, with his eternal grin.

And he began trotting in front with that swinging pace of which Indians alone possess the secret.

The conversation had taken place sufficiently near to Kidd's lurking-place for him to overhear every syllable. Suddenly he started. An idea doubtless crossed his mind, for after allowing the horsemen to go on, but not too far for him to catch them up, he left his thicket, and went after them, growling between his teeth—"What the deuce relations can these birds of night have with Don Rufino Contreras? Well, we shall soon see?"

On turning into the track he started after the party, who were a short distance ahead of him.

"*Santas tardes, caballeros*," he said, as he joined the party of men in black, "by what fortunate accident do I meet you on this desolate road?"

"Fortune is with us, caballero," Don Parfindo answered, politely; "this accursed Indian has led us a roundabout road."

"That is possible," Kidd observed; "and without being too curious, will you allow me to ask whither you are going? I am going to Quitovar."

"We are going there too, in the first instance. Are we still a great distance from the pueblo?"

"Only a few leagues; we shall arrive before two o'clock, if you will allow me to take your guide's place."

"Your proposal delights me, caballero, and I most heartily accept it."

"That is agreed; if you do not know the pueblo, I will take you to a capital house, where you will be excellently treated."

"I thank you, caballero; it is the first time I have been to Real de Minas. I am a bailiff at Hermosillo."

"A bailiff!" the bandit said; "carai! that is a famous profession."

"At your service, were I competent for it," Don Parfindo said.

"I do not say no," Kidd continued, giving himself an air of importance. "When a man carries on a large business, as I do, the acquaintance of a caballero so distinguished as you appear to be can only be most advantageous."

"You confound me, senor."

"Oh, do not thank me, for what I say I really think; I was speaking about it only a few days back to Don Rufino Contreras."

"Do you know Don Rufino?" the bailiff asked, with rising respect.

"He is one of my most intimate friends. Are you acquainted with him too?"

"He has instructed me to proceed in his name against certain debtors of his."

"*Viva Dios!* this is a strange meeting," the adventurer exclaimed.

"What a worthy senor!" the bailiff remarked; "and so honourable!"

The two scoundrels understood each other. The acquaintance was formed,



and confidence sprang up quite naturally. The conversation was continued on the best possible terms. Kidd adroitly led the other to make a general confession, and the latter, believing that he had to do with an intimate of Don Rufino, told him the secret of the negotiations he was entrusted with, without any visible pressure. Altogether this is what the adventurer learned:—Don Rufino Contreras, impelled by some motive unknown, had secretly bought up the claims of all the persons to whom the Marquis de Moguer was indebted. So soon as he held them he had taken out writs, through a third party, against the marquis, so as to dispossess him of the small property left him—among other things, the Hacienda del Toro, which he evinced a great desire to possess.

The adventurer listened with the most earnest attention to the revelations the bailiff made with a certain degree of complacency. Kidd, who was accustomed to fish in troubled waters, had found an opportunity for a famous haul in these revelations.

Kidd, still continuing to act as guide to his comrades, led them straight to a meson, where he left them at liberty to rest themselves, after warmly recommending them to the landlord. Then the bandit, placing his horse in the corral, and carefully wrapping himself up in his zarape, and pulling the brim of his hat over his eyes to escape recognition, glided through the darkness to the house of Don Marcos de Niza, which he entered. The captain, as we said, was accessible at all hours of the day or night.

The bandit gave a meaning smile.

"My news is excellent, captain," he said, laying a marked stress on the words.

"*Fuego de Cristi!* I hope so, for am I not commandant of the town?"

"Yes; but I am not going to talk with you about politics at present."

"In that case go to the deuce, scoundrel," the captain said, shrugging his shoulders, angrily; "do you think I have nothing more important to do than listen to your rubbish?"

"I invent nothing, excellency. Fortune has this very day granted me the opportunity of catching a secret it is most important for you to know, that is all."

"Well, tell me what this mighty secret is?"

"If the secret does not relate directly to you, it interests in a most eminent degree one of your nearest relatives."

"Ah! who is he?"

"The Marquis de Moguer."

The captain became serious: he frowned with a menacing expression, which made Kidd tremble in spite of his well-bred effrontery.

"Speak, and be brief," he said to him.

Kidd, without further pressing, related in its fullest details all that had occurred between himself and the bailiff on the road.

"Is that all?" asked the captain, when the other had stopped.

"Yes, excellency."

"Good; now be off. You will continue to watch this man, and report to me all he does."

And he dismissed the man with a wave of the hand. The adventurer bowed, and went away. When alone, the captain reflected for a few minutes, and then wrote a letter, sealed it, and summoned his orderly to send it off by express.



## CHAPTER XXX.

### COMPLICATIONS.

AFTER leaving the captain's study, Kidd halted in the anteroom, not because he had any plan formed, but through that instinct which urges villains of his species not to leave a good place till compelled. He had heard the captain summon his assistento. Isedro, the captain's assistento, was an Opatas Indian, of tried bravery and fidelity. Unluckily, though he did his duty in the battlefield, his intellect was rather restricted, and, like all Indians, he had a propensity for strong liquors, which had several times brought him to great grief. Kidd was familiar with the soldier, and knew his weakness; hence his plan was formed in a moment.

"Since you remain here," he said to him, "I shall be off: when I came to speak to the captain, I left a nearly full bottle of mezcal at the tocanda of Master Cosperto, and on my word I feel inclined to go and finish it."

"My duty does not keep me here," the Indian answered. "I have a long ride to make."

"A long ride!" the adventurer exclaimed; "carai! it is the same case with me, and I know no better preservative against the night cold than mezcal. If your inclinations lie in the same way, it is at your service."

"Upon due reflection, I see no harm in it."

"Let us make haste, then," the brigand continued.

The adventurer honourably kept his word: not only did he order a bottle of mezcal, but at the same time one of excellent Cata'onian refino. The Indian's prudence was entirely routed by such generosity; the more so because he had no reason to distrust the bandit. When they had finished, the bandit rose, paid the score, and called for another bottle of refino.

"This is for the road," he said.

"An excellent idea," remarked the assistento, whose eyes flashed like carbuncles, and who was beginning to have a very vague notion of the state of affairs. They left the rancho, and mounted their horses. When the adventurer found himself in the open country he drew a deep breath of relief, as he gave his too confiding comrade a sarcastic glance.

"Now," he said, "we must take the shortest road, in order to arrive sooner."

"What, are there two roads?" Isedro asked.

"There are ten," Kidd replied, coolly; "but the shortest runs almost in a right line, and passes close to the Hacienda del Toro."

"Let us take that, then."

"Ah," the adventurer said, pleasantly, "let us take a drink and start." Unworking the bottle, he took a pull, and then handed it to his companion, who imitated him, with an evident expression of pleasure.

"You say, then," Kidd resumed, as he smacked his lips, "that you are going to the Hacienda del Toro?"

"Yes, I am."

"It is a good house, and most hospitable."



"Do you know it?"

"Carai! I should think so. The majordomo is my intimate friend. What happy days I have spent with that excellent Senor Paredes!"

"Since it is your road, why not call there with me, as you are certain of a kind reception?"

"I do not say I will not; I suppose you are going to ask the marquis for some men, as soldiers are scarce at the pueblo?"

"I do not think that is the case. Don Hernando has already authorised the captain to enlist his miners, and the peons left him he will need to defend the hacienda in the event of an attack."

"That is true; besides, it is no business of mine. Let every man have his own secrets."

"Oh, I do not think there is any great secret in the matter: the captain is a near relation of the marquis; they often write to each other."

"That is probable; the more so because it is said that the marquis's affairs are in a very bad state at present."

"Yes, yes," the Indian continued, "but the affairs of the marquis might easily be arranged sooner than is supposed, comrade."

"With his name it cannot be difficult to procure money."

"Nonsense! that is not the point, and I know what I know."

"Exactly, Senor Isedro, and as what you know may be a secret, I will not urge you to tell it me."

The intoxication of the Opatas was at its height. Excited even more by the horse's gallop and the adventurer's artfully managed questions, Isedro felt passion mount to his head. The intoxications of Indians is horrible: they become raving madmen; their heated brain gives birth to the strangest hallucinations, and under the influence of spirits they are capable of the greatest crimes. The bandit was aware of all these peculiarities, by which he hoped to profit. They were riding at this moment along the course of a small stream, a confluent of the Rio Bravo del Norte, whose wooded banks afforded sufficient concealment. The adventurer made his horse bound on one side, and, drawing his machete, exclaimed—

"Brute, drunken Opatas!" At the same moment he dealt the poor fellow such a sudden blow that he fell off his horse like a log. Was he dead? Kidd supposed so; but the bandit was a very prudent man. Indians are crafty, and this death might be a feint.

A quarter of an hour had elapsed, and the Indian had not made a movement. Reassured by this complete immobility, the bandit resolved to dismount and go up to him. All at once the Opatas rose; with a tiger leap he bounded on the adventurer, twined his arms round him, and the two men rolled on the ground, uttering savage yells, and trying to take each other's life. It was a short but horrible struggle. The Opatas, in spite of his wounds, derived a factitious strength from the fury that animated him and the excitement produced by intoxication, which was heightened by his ardent desire to take revenge for the cowardly treachery of which he was the victim.

Unhappily, the efforts he was compelled to make opened his wounds, and his blood flowed in streams; and with his blood he felt his life departing. He made a supreme effort to strangle the miserable adventurer in his clenched fingers; but the latter, by a sudden and cleverly calculated movement, succeeded in liberating himself from the Indian's iron grasp. He rose quickly, and at the moment when the assistant recovered from his surprise, and prepared to renew the fight, Kidd raised his machete, and cleft the poor fellow's head.

He reflected for a few moments; then walked up to the corpse, turned



it over, and opened the breast of the uniform to obtain the letter. He had no difficulty in finding it; he placed it in his own pocket, and then stripped his victim, on the chance that he might want to use his uniform.

Before leaving the scene of the murder, the bandit carefully washed the soldier's clothes, and removed any blood-stains from his own; then, after assuring himself by a searching glance that there was nothing to denounce the crime of which he had been guilty, he whistled up his horse, and mounted, after carefully fastening the soldier's uniform behind him. He rolled a cigarette, lit it, and set out again, with the satisfaction of a man who had just succeeded in a most important affair, which had caused him great anxiety.

It was somewhat by chance that Kidd originally told the assistento that he was proceeding to Arispe; but the discovery of the letter, and the soldier's confidential remarks, had converted this chance into certainty. The bandit comprehended of what importance it would be to Don Rufino to be informed of all that was going on at the pueblo at the Hacienda del Toro, that he might be able to arrange his plans with certainty.

As Kidd was well known he easily obtained admission to the town; but when he had passed the gates he reflected that it was too early for him to call on the senator. Hence he proceeded straight to a rancho he knew—a suspicious den, the usual gathering-place of fellows of his sort. The ranchero greeted him with the most agreeable smile.

The adventurer entered the rancho, leaving his horse in the corral, and immediately began to arrange his toilette, which was, as a general rule, neglected.

When the Cabildo clock struck nine Kidd thought it was time to be off; he rose, majestically threw a piastre on the table in payment of his score, wrapped his zarape round him, and left the house.

"Whom can he have assassinated to be so rich?" the ranchero asked himself.

Kidd felt he was watched, and hence carefully avoided going straight to the senator's house. The adventurer walked about the town for half-an-hour; thus he gradually approached the senator's mansion, and hurriedly slipped under the sanguan.

"Holloa! you fellow!" a domestic suddenly shouted to him. "What do you want here?"

"What can I want except to see his excellency, Don Rufino?"

"Excellent!" the other said, derisively; "and do you suppose his excellency will receive you, who look much more like a lepero than a caballero?"

"You are not polite, my good fellow; what you say may be correct, but the remark is uncalled for. Patched clothes often conceal very honourable caballeros."

The servant shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. Still he reflected, and asked, with a more conciliatory tone than he had yet employed—

"Your name?"

"You do not want to know it; merely tell your master that I have just come from the Hacienda del Toro."

"If that is the case, why did you not tell me so before?"

"Probably because you did not ask me. Go and announce me."

The domestic went off without replying, and Kidd took advantage of his departure to install himself in the vestibule. The absence of the servant was not long, and when he returned his manner was entirely changed.

"Caballero," he said, with a bow, "his excellency is waiting for you."

"Fellow!" the adventurer said, with a contemptuous glance, "show the way."



And, laughing in his beard, he followed the footman.

The adventurer remarked with some degree of pleasure that the valet led him through several rooms before reaching the one in which the senator was sitting; at length he turned the handle of the door, threw it open, and stepped aside to let the bandit pass. The latter walked in boldly.

"Ah!" said the senator, starting slightly at seeing him; "it is you?"

"Yes," he replied, with a graceful bow.

"Retire," Don Rufino said to the valet; "I am not at home to any one."

The valet bowed, went out, and closed the door behind him.

"What do you want?" Don Rufino then asked.

"To talk about serious matters," said Kidd.

"It is you then, bandit?" the senator said.

"I fancy I can notice that you did not expect me."

"I confess it. I will even add that I did not in the slightest desire your visit."

"You are very forgetful of your friends, Don Rufino."

"What do you mean, scoundrel, by daring to use such language to me?"

"I must observe," said Kidd, with the most imperturbable coolness, "that you forgot to offer me a chair."

Then, crossing one leg over the other, he began rolling a cigarette, a task to which he gave the most serious attention.

The senator felt the bandit must be humoured. He therefore immediately softened the expression of his face, and handed the adventurer a beautifully chased gold mechero.

"Pray light your cigarette, my dear Kidd," he said, with a pleasant smile.

"Ah!" exclaimed the bandit, with a splendidly feigned regret, "I have dreamed for years that I possessed such a toy, but, unluckily, fortune has ever thwarted me."

"If it please you so much," Don Rufino answered, with a mighty effort, "I shall be delighted to make you a present of it."

"You are really most generous."

And, after lighting his cigarette, he unceremoniously placed the mechero in his pocket.

"Of course your visit has an object?" the senator said, after a moment's interval.

"They always have, Don Rufino," the other answered; "the first was to see you."

"I thank you for the politeness; but I do not think that is sufficient reason for forcing your way in here."

"Forcing is rather a harsh word," the bandit said. "But come, Don Rufino, let us deal fairly, and not waste our time."

"I wish nothing better. Speak, then, and the plague take you!"

"Thank you. I have come, not to propose a bargain, but to sell you certain information and a letter of the utmost importance."

"Good! Let us see whether I can accept the bargain."

"In the first place, allow me to say two words. Our situation has greatly changed during the last few days; you are now afraid of me."

"I afraid of you?"

"Yes, senor, because I hold your secret, and you can no longer threaten to kill me."

"Oh! And why not, if you please?" the senator asked.

"Because we are alone; you are unarmed; I am stronger than you; and at your slightest movement I would blow out your brains like those of a wild



beast. Do you now comprehend me, my dear sir?" he added, as he produced a brace of pistols.

The senator only shrugged his shoulders, and smiled.

"Laugh if you like, my master; but I repeat that you are in my power. I can deliver to Captain Don Marcos Niza certain papers, which, were they opened by him, might, I fear, gravely compromise you. There is one among them—'I, the undersigned, declare that my valet, Lupino Contrarias, has treacherously assassinated and deserted me in a frightful desert, and there plundered me of everything I possessed, consisting of two mules laden with gold-dust, and two thousand three hundred gold ounces in current money. On the point of appearing before my God, I denounce this wretch,' etc., etc. 'Signed ——.' Shall I tell the name of the signer? But what is the matter with you, my dear sir? Do you feel ill? You are as pale as a corpse."

In truth, on hearing the narrative, which the bandit told with a species of complacency, the senator was seized with a violent fit of terror.

"It is extraordinary," the bandit continued, "how nothing can be trusted to in this world."

By a supreme effort of will the senator had restored calmness to his face, and forced his lips to smile.

"Carai!" he said, with a laugh "that is a wonderful story, and admirably arranged. But who on earth do you expect to believe such a story?"

"You, first of all, for you know the truth of the story; and the proofs are in my hands."

"I do not say they are not; but, admitting the reality of the facts you allege, they took place a long time ago. This Lupino Contrarias has disappeared; he is dead, perhaps. As for his master, the pistols were too well loaded to give him a chance of escape."

"How do you know that the weapons were so carefully loaded?"

"I suppose so."

"But," said Kidd, "continuing our suppositions, let us admit for a moment that this master, whom his valet is persuaded he killed, should be, on the contrary, alive and——"

"Oh, that is quite impossible."

"Do not interrupt me so, senor. And I say, were he to lay his hand on his valet's shoulder, as I lay mine on yours, and assert, 'This is my assassin!' what answer would you give to that?"

"I—I!" the senator exclaimed, wildly; "what answer should I give?"

"You would give none," the bandit continued; "overcome by the evidence, and crushed by the very presence of your victim, you would be irretrievably lost."

There was a second of horrible silence between these two men, who looked at each other as if about to have a frightful contest.

"After this, what would you of me?" said the senator, sharply.

"I am waiting to hear your resolution before I offer any conditions."

Don Rufino Contreras remained for some minutes plunged in deep thought.

"Well, yes," he said at last, "all that you have narrated is true. I cowardly assassinated, to rob him of his fortune, the man who offered me a helping hand in my misery, and treated me as a friend rather than a servant. But this fortune, however badly it may have been acquired, I possess; by its means I have acquired a position in the world; by roguery and falsehood I have succeeded in imposing on everybody; I have rank and a name; and death alone could make me resign this position, so hardly attained. So what do you want? Reflect carefully, then, before answering me, comrade, for my proposition is in



earnest. Once the bargain is concluded between us we will say no more about it. I give you ten minutes to answer me."

This clear and categorical proposal affected the bandit more than he liked to show. He understood that he had to do with one of those indomitable men who, once they have made their mind up, never alter it.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### A FRIENDLY BARGAIN.

DON RUFINO, with his head resting on his right hand, was carelessly playing with a paper-knife, and patiently waiting till his visitor thought proper to speak. This affected indifference perplexed the adventurer.

"Before all, Don Rufino," said the bandit, "I must tell you the motives of my visit."

"I do not at all care about them," the senator answered, negligently.

"I think that when you have heard what I have to say you will change your opinion, senor."

"That is possible, and I do not deny it," the senator said, ironically; "but you will allow, my dear Senor Kidd, that you interfere so thoroughly in my affairs that it is difficult for me to decide."

"I will tell you, in the first place, that a certain Alguazil, Don Parfindo Purro by name, arrived yesterday at the pueblo of Quitovar."

"Very good," the senator answered, looking fixedly at the bandit.

"Now, I do not know how it is, but the bailiff had scarce reached the pueblo ere by some strange fatality Captain de Niza was informed of his arrival."

"Only think of that!" the senator remarked, ironically.

In spite of the strong dose of effrontery with which nature had endowed him, the adventurer felt involuntarily troubled.

"And still, through this implacable fatality, the captain was not only informed of the arrival of this worthy Don Parfindo, but also of the reasons that brought him," Don Rufino continued.

"How do you know that?" Kidd exclaimed, with pretended surprise.

"Oh, I guess it, that is all," the senator replied; "but go on, pray."

"As you are aware, the captain is a relation of the Marquis de Moguer," the bandit went on.

"Yes, and a very near relation."

"Hence he did not hesitate, but at once sent off a messenger to the Hacienda del Toro, carrying a letter in which he probably gave the most circumstantial details about the bailiff."

"Ah, that letter!" Don Rufino exclaimed, "that letter! I would give its weight in gold for it."

"Very well, senor," the bandit remarked; "I give it you for nothing."



He took the letter from his pocket, and handed it to the senator; the latter bounded on it like a tiger on its prey, and tore it from Kidd's hands.

"Gently, gently; be good enough to remark that the seal is not broken."

"How did this letter fall into your hands?" the senator asked.

"Oh, very simply," the other replied, lightly; "just fancy that the man the captain selected to carry his missive was a friend of mine. As I intended to pay you a visit at Arispe, and as I felt grieved at seeing this man traverse such a dangerous road alone by night, I offered to accompany him, and he consented. That is the whole story."

"It is really most simple," Don Rufino remarked, with a smile, and broke the seal.

He read the letter through with the utmost attention, and then let his head hang on his chest, and fell into deep thought.

"Well," the adventurer asked, "is the news that letter conveys so very bad?"

"The news is of the utmost importance to me, senor; still, I ask myself for what purpose you seized it?"

"Did I not tell you that I wish to make a bargain?" the bandit said.

"That is true; but I am awaiting a full explanation from you."

"I see that you are beginning to understand me, and that, between the pair of us, we shall come to something."

"You are not rich," the senator remarked, frankly approaching the point.

"I am forced to confess that I am not actually rolling in wealth."

"Well, if you like I will make you a rich man at one stroke."

"What do you mean by rich, senor?" the bandit asked, distrustfully.

"I have in Upper California a hacienda, of which I will hand you the title-deeds this very day."

"Hum!" said Kidd, thrusting out his upper lip; "is the hacienda a fine one?"

"Immense; covered with ganado and manades of wild horses; it is situated near the sea."

"That is something, I allow; but that is not wealth."

"I will add to this hacienda a round sum of one hundred thousand piastres in gold."

"What!" said the bandit, rising as if moved by a spring, and turning pale with joy, "did you say—one hundred thousand?"

"Yes, I repeat," the senator continued; "with such a sum it is possible to be honest."

"*Viva Christo!* I should think so!" he exclaimed, gleefully.

"It only depends on yourself to possess it within a week."

"Oh, yes, I understand; there is a condition. Carai!"

"This is the condition; listen to me, and, above all, understand me thoroughly."

"Carai! I should think so; a hacienda and one hundred thousand piastres!"

"You must not impede my prospects in any way; allow me to espouse Dona Marianna, and on the day of the marriage hand me the tablets which you took from the gentleman so unhappily assassinated by his valet."

"Very well. Is that all?"

"I insist that when you deliver me the tablets, you will supply proof that the writer is really dead."

"*Cuerpo de Christo!* the man is not so easily to be taken unawares."

"Yes; but once that he is dead you will be rich."

"I know that, and it is a consideration. No matter; it will be a tough job."



"You can take it or leave it."

"I take it, *viva Christo!* I take it. Never shall I find again such a chance."

"Then that matter is quite settled between us?"

"Most thoroughly; you can set your mind at rest."

"In that case, I will not detain you. Good-bye."

"Till we meet again, *senor.*"

"Show this caballero out," the senator said to the man-servant.

The two men bowed for the last time as if they were the best friends in the world, and then separated.

"Villain!" Don Rufino exclaimed, so soon as he was alone; "if ever I can make you pay me for all, I will not spare you."

"Hang it all!" the bandit said to himself; "the affair has been hot. I believe that I shall act wisely in distrusting my friend; if the dear *senor* has a chance of playing me an ill turn he will not let it slip."

When he had ended this soliloquy he found himself under the *sanguan*, where the man-servant took leave of him with a respectful bow. Kidd found the *ranchero* standing in his doorway, attentively surveying the approaches to his house.

"Eh!" the host said, with a bow, "back already?"

"As you see, *compadre*; but let me have my breakfast at once."

"Are you going to leave us already?"

"I do not know; come, pray make haste."

The *ranchero* served him without further questioning. The adventurer made a hearty meal, paid liberally to appease his host's ill-temper, saddled his horse, and set out, without saying whether he should return or not.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE HACIENDA DEL TORO.

WE will now leap over an interval of a fortnight, and return to the Hacienda del Toro.

Dona Marianna, persuaded by Dona Esperanza, or perhaps unconsciously attracted by the secret longings of her heart, had consented to remain a couple of days with her. These days were occupied with pleasant conversation, in which the maiden at length disclosed the secret which she imagined to be buried in the remotest nook of her heart.

Stronghand, for his part, had yielded to the magical fascination the maiden exercised over him. Carried away by the feelings that agitated him, he displayed all the true prudence and goodness contained in his character, which was, perhaps, rather savage, but it was that loyal and powerful savageness which pleases women, by creating in them a secret desire to conquer these rebellious natures, and dominate them by their delicious seductions.

During the two days the young couple did not once utter the word love, and



yet they clearly explained it, and no longer entertained a doubt as to their mutual attachment.

Still, it was time to think about returning to the hacienda. It was settled that Dona Marianna should inform her father about what she had learned from Dona Esperanza.

"Take care," the maiden said; "my only hope is in you. If you fail in your plans I shall be left alone defenceless."

"Trust to me, Dona Marianna; I have staked my happiness and my life on the terrible game I am preparing to play."

"I will pray to Heaven for both you and myself."

These words, with which the young people parted, were equivalent to a mutual agreement. Dona Esperanza tenderly embraced the maiden.

"Remember the gold," she said to her; and Dona Marianna replied with a smile.

The tigrero held the horses by the bridle. Stronghand and ten hunters prepared to follow the travellers at a distance, in order to help them, should it be necessary. The journey was performed in silence.

As Dona Marianna had expressed a wish to reach their journey's end as quickly as possible, Marianno took a different road from that which he had previously followed.

At about three p.m. they came in sight of the rock, and began scaling the path, and then noticed the hunters, commanded by Stronghand, drawn up in good order on the skirt of the forest. Dona Marianna waved her handkerchief in the air, entered the hacienda, and the first person she met was Paredes.

"*Valga mi dios!* nina," he exclaimed; "where have you come from?"

"Does not my father know that I have been to pay a visit to my nurse?"

"Your brother told him so, nina; but as your absence was so prolonged, the marquis was afraid that some accident had happened to you."

"You see that it was not so, my good Paredes."

"Don Hernando will be pleased at your return, nina; he is at this moment engaged with Don Ruiz in inspecting the walls on the side of the huerta, in order to make certain that they are in a sound condition, for we fear more and more an attack from the Indians."

"In that case do not disturb my father, and I will go and rest in the drawing-room. It is unnecessary to importune him now."

"Importune him!" exclaimed the honest majordomo; "excuse me, senorita, if I am not of your opinion on that head."

"In that case, act as you think proper, my worthy Paredes."

The majordomo, who had probably only been waiting for this permission, ran off.

The young lady now entered her apartments.

Don Hernando heard, with a lively feeling of joy, of his daughter's return. When he entered, with Don Ruiz, the room in which Dona Marianna was awaiting him, he opened his arms, and embraced her tenderly.

"Naughty girl!" he exclaimed; "why did you stay away from us so long?"

"My dear father, during my entire absence I was only thinking of you."

"Alas!" the marquis murmured, with a choking sigh, "I know your heart, my poor child."

"Perhaps you may be saved, father," she said, with a toss of her head.

"Do not attempt to lead me astray by false hope, which in the end would render our frightful situation even more cruel than it is."

"I do not wish to do so, father," she said, earnestly; "but I bring you a certainty."



"A certainty, child! Where do you expect to find means to conjure ill fortune?"

"Not very far off, father; at this very place, if you like."

Don Hernando made no reply, but let his head drop on his chest mournfully.

"Listen to Marianna, father," Don Ruiz then said; "she is the angel of our home."

"Thanks, Ruiz. Oh, you are right; I would sooner die than dream of increasing my father's grief."

"I know it, child," the marquis answered; "but you are young and inexperienced."

"Why not listen to what my sister has to say, father?" Don Ruiz said.

"Of what good is it, children?"

"Good heavens, father! in our fearful situation we should neglect nothing. Listen to my sister first."

"As you press it, Ruiz, I will hear her."

"I do not press, father, I entreat. Come, speak, little sister."

Dona Marianna smiled sweetly, threw her arms round her father's neck, and laid her head on his shoulder with a charming gesture.

"How I love you, my dear father!" she said; "how I should like to see you happy! I have nothing to tell you, for you will not believe me; and what I might have to say is so strange and improbable, that you would not put faith in it."

"You see, child, that I was right."

"Wait a moment, father," she continued; "if I have nothing to tell you, I have a favour to ask."

"A favour!—yes, my dear."

"Yes, father, a favour; but what I desire is so singular that I really do not know how to make my request."

"Oh, oh, little maid," the marquis said, with a smile, "it must be a very terrible thing for you to hesitate so in revealing it."

"No, father, it is not terrible; but, I repeat, it will appear to you wild."

"Oh, my child," he continued, "I have seen so many wild things for some time past, that I shall not attach any importance to one now."

"Listen to me, father: the favour I ask of you you must promise to grant."

"Caramba!" he said, good-humouredly, "you are taking your precautions, *senorita*. But reassure yourself, I pledge you my word which you ask for so peremptorily. Are you satisfied now?"

"Oh, father, how kind you are! You really mean it now? You pledge your word?"

"Yes, yes, little obstinate, I do pledge my word."

The girl danced with delight, as she clapped her pretty little hands.

"On my word, this little girl is mad!" the marquis said, with a smile.

"Yes, father, mad with delight; for I hope soon to prove to you that your fortune has never been more flourishing than it now is. I have a great project in my head; but, in order that it may be thoroughly successful, I must be mistress of my actions, without control or remarks, from eight o'clock this evening till midnight."

"I have promised it," Don Hernando replied, with a smile. "A gentleman has only his word. Must I announce this officially to our people?" he added, sportively.

"It is unnecessary, father; only two persons need be told."

"And who are these two privileged persons, if you please?"

"My foster-brother, Marianno, the tigrero, and Jose Paredes."



"Come, I see you know where to place your confidence."

"These men must be provided with picks, spades, crow bars and lanterns."

"Stories about buried treasure are thoroughly worn out in this country, my child," he said, with a dubious shake of his head.

"I can offer you no explanation, father. You are ignorant of my plan," she said, with an exquisite smile. "You ought not to give an example of rebellion to my new subjects."

"That is perfectly true, my dear child; I am in the wrong."

"I have only a word to add. You and Ruiz must also provide yourselves with tools."

"Oh, oh, that is rather hard—not on me, who am young," Don Ruiz exclaimed, "but on father."

"I may have to lend a hand myself," Dona Marianna exclaimed. "Believe me, Don Ruiz, you should not treat this affair lightly."

"Not I, sister."

"Yes, Ruiz, you do, although you don't like to allow it."

"What you desire shall be done, daughter," Don Hernando said; "and, whatever the result may be, I shall feel grateful to you for the efforts you are making."

Don Ruiz, by his father's orders, warned the majordomo and the tigrero, who were already preparing to return to the rancho.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### THE HUERTA.

THE Hacienda del Toro possessed a huerta or garden which the Marquises de Moguer had in turn sought to embellish. This huerta contained in all thirty acres—that is to say, a surface of about twelve square miles. When the curfew was rung and the majordomo had assured himself that the sentries were at their posts, he made a general inspection of the whole hacienda, and then proceeded, accompanied by the tigrero, to the blue room, where Don Hernando and his son and daughter were assembled.

"All is in order, mi amo," he said, "everybody has retired to his jacal."

"You are quite certain, Paredes, that no one is walking about?"

"No one; I made my rounds with the greatest strictness."

"Very good; now, daughter, you can give your orders."

Dona Marianna bowed to her father with a smile.

"Paredes," she said, "have you procured the tools my brother ordered?"

"Nina," he answered, "I have placed six picks, six crowbars, and six spades in a clump of carob trees."

"Why such a number of tools?" she asked, laughingly.

"Because, senorita, some may break."

"You are right. Follow me, senors."



"And the lanterns?" Don Ruiz observed.

"We will take them with us but not light them till we reach the spot whither I am taking you. Our lights might be seen and arouse suspicion, and that is what we must avoid most of all."

"Excellently reasoned, daughter."

Dona Marianna rose, and the four men followed her in silence. They crossed the apartments instead of passing through the patios, which were thronged with sleepers, and entered the huerta by large double doors, from which the garden was reached by a flight of steps. On leaving the blue room Dona Marianna took the precaution to blow out the candles, so that the hacienda was plunged into complete darkness, and all appeared asleep.

After an instant—not of hesitation, for the maiden, although her heart was beating loudly, was firm and resolute—but of reflection, Dona Marianna rapidly descended the steps and entered the garden, closely followed by the four men, who also experienced an internal emotion for which they could not account. They had gone but a few yards when they halted: they had reached the thicket in which the tools were concealed. The majordomo and the tigrero took them on their shoulders, while the marquis and his son carried the lanterns.

The marquis and his son felt their curiosity increase from moment to moment. They saw the girl so gay, and so sure of herself, that they involuntarily began to hope, although they found it impossible to explain the nature of their hopes to themselves.

The young lady still walked on, stopping at times and muttering a few words in a low voice, as if trying to remember the instructions she had previously received, but never hesitating, or taking one walk for another; in a word, she did not once retrace her steps when she had selected her course.

At length Dona Marianna halted.

"Light the lanterns," she said.

This was the first remark made since they left the blue room. The lanterns were instantly lighted.

"Show me a light, Ruiz," said Dona Marianna.

The spot where they found themselves was situated at nearly the centre of the huerta; it was a species of grass-plot, on which only stubbly, stunted grass grew. In the centre rose a sort of tumulus, formed of several rocks piled on one another without any apparent symmetry, and which the owners of the hacienda had always respected in consequence of its barbarous singularity. An old tradition asserted that one of the old kings of Cibola, on the ruins of which town the hacienda was built, had been buried at the spot, which was called "The Tomb of the Cacique," after the tradition, whether it were true or false.

"Ah, ah!" said the marquis, "so you have brought us to the cacique's tomb, my girl?"

"Yes, father; we can now begin operations without fear of being seen."

"I greatly fear that your hopes have led you astray."

"You promised, father, to make no remarks."

"That is true, and so I will hold my tongue."

"Very good, father," she said, with a smile; "you will soon be duly rewarded."

And the young lady continued her investigations.

"In what direction does the clump of old aloes lie?" she at length asked.

The majordomo looked round for a moment, and then, placing himself in a



certain direction, said—"The aloes of Cibola, as we call them, are just facing me."

"Are you certain of it, Paredes?"

"Yes, nina, I am."

The young lady immediately placed herself by the majordomo's side, and, bending down over the stones, examined them with extreme care and attention. At length she drew herself up with a start of joy.

"My father," she said, with emotion, "the honour of dealing the first stroke belongs to you."

"Very good, my child; where am I to strike?"

"There!" she said, pointing to a rather large gap between two stones.

Don Hernando drove in the pick, and, pressing on it forcibly, detached a stone, which rolled on the grass.

"Very good," said the girl. "Now stop, father, and let these young men work; you can join them presently, should it prove necessary. Come, Ruiz—come, to-day—come, Paredes—to work, my friends!"

The three men set to work ardently, excited by Dona Marianna's words, and soon the stones, leaping from their bed of earth, began to strew the ground around in large numbers. Not one of the three men suspected the nature of the task he was performing, and yet such is the attraction of a secret that they drove in their picks with extraordinary ardour. All at once they stopped in discouragement, for an enormous mass of rock resisted their efforts.

"Why are you stopping, brother?" Dona Marianna asked.

"Because we have reached the rock, and should break our picks, without getting any further."

The young lady took a lantern and looked; then, without answering her brother, she turned to Paredes and the tigrero.

"You," she said, "are old servants of the family, and I can order you without any fear of being contradicted; so obey me. Remove, as rapidly as possible, all the stones round that supposed rock, and when that is done, I fancy I shall convince the most incredulous."

The two men resumed work; and Don Ruiz, piqued by his sister's remark, imitated them. The marquis, with folded arms and head bowed on his chest, was overcome by such persistency, and began to hope again. Ere long the stones were removed, and the mass of rock stood solitary.

"Father," said the young lady, "you dealt the first blow, and must deal the last; help these three men in removing this block."

Without replying, the marquis seized a pick, and placed himself by the side of the workers. The four men dug their tools into the friable earth which adhered to the rock; then, with a common and gradual effort, they began raising the stone until it suddenly lost its balance, toppled over, and fell on the ground, revealing a deep excavation.

"Burn some wood to purify the air," the young lady said.

They obeyed with feverish activity.

"Now come, father," Dona Marianna said, as she boldly entered the excavation.

The marquis went in, and the rest followed him. After proceeding for about one hundred yards along a species of gallery, they perceived the body of a man, lying on a sort of clumsy dais, in a perfect state of preservation, and rather resembling a sleeping person than a corpse. Near the body the fleshless bones of another person were scattered on the ground.

"Look!" said the maiden.

"Yes," the marquis answered, "it is the body interred under the tumulus."



"You are mistaken father; it is the body of a miner, and the fancied tumulus is nothing but a very rich gold mine, which has remained for ages under the guard of this insensate body. Look round you," she said, raising the lantern.

The marquis uttered a cry of delight and admiration. Doubt was no longer possible. All around he saw enormous veins of gold, easy of extraction almost without labour. The marquis was dazzled, and fell unconscious on the floor of the mine.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### THE ASSAULT ON QUITOVAR.

WHILE these events were taking place at the Hacienda del Toro, others of an even more important nature were being carried out at the Real de Minas. Kidd, the adventurer, had scarce left Don Rufino, ere the senator made his preparations for departure, and at once set out for the Real de Minas. At eight a.m. of the following day his first business was to present himself to the town commandant, Don Marcos de Niza. The captain not only received him coldly, but with a certain amount of constraint.

"My dear captain," the senator said, after the usual compliments, "I am pleased at having been selected by the Presidential Government as its delegate to the military authorities of the State of Sonora."

The captain bowed, but said nothing.

"Firstly," the senator continued, "I make the acquaintance of an excellent caballero; secondly, before being joined in the command I asked for the rank of lieutenant-colonel for you, a step which, between ourselves, you have long deserved."

And drawing from his pocket-book a large folded paper, he laid it in the hand which the captain mechanically held out. The senator had just counted on the skilfully managed surprise. The captain, confounded by the tardy justice done him, could not find a word to answer.

"And now," the senator continued, cutting short the thanks which the new colonel thought himself bound to offer, "permit me to change the conversation, my dear colonel."

"I am listening," Don Marcos answered; "if I can be of any service——"

"Oh, merely to give me some information," the senator interrupted him; "I will explain the matter in two words. I am, as you are probably aware, very intimate with a relative of yours, the Marquis de Moguer."

Don Marcos gave a deep bow.

"Now," the senator continued, "the marquis, as you of course know, has been seriously tried of late; in a word, between ourselves, he is almost ruined. Being most desirous to save a man with whom I shall be probably closely connected within a few days, not merely by the ties of friendship, but also by the closer links of relationship, I have bought up all his debts. The man whom



I intrusted with this difficult negotiation will arrive immediately in this town.

"He arrived some days ago," the colonel remarked.

"Indeed!" Don Rufino exclaimed. "Then I will claim a service at your hands."

"A service!" Don Marcos exclaimed, with instinctive distrust.

"Yes," the senator continued, tranquilly; "I hardly know how to explain it to you, for it is so difficult, however friendly you may be with a man whose daughter you are about to marry, to say to him, 'You owed enormous sums; have bought up your debts; here are the receipts; burn them.'"

"What!" the colonel exclaimed, in admiration, "would you do that?"

"I never had any other thought," the senator replied, simply.

"Oh, it is a great and generous action, caballero."

"Not at all; on the contrary, it is quite natural. Don Hernando is my friend. I only did what any one else in my place would have done."

"No, no," Don Marcos said, shaking his head with an air of conviction; "no, senor, no one would have acted as you have done."

"All the worse, all the worse, and I feel sorry for humanity," Don Rufino said.

"What is the service you expect from me, senor?"

"A very simple thing. I will give you in a few moments those unlucky receipts, which I will ask you to be kind enough to hand to the marquis."

The senator went away leaving the colonel completely under the charm. He proceeded hastily to the meson where Don Parfindo was lodged.

The senator's conversation with his agent had occupied some time, and when Don Rufino returned to the colonel's house he found the latter busy in making known his new rank to his officers. When the two gentlemen were alone again the ice was completely broken between them, and they were the best friends in the world.

"Well?" the colonel asked.

"All is settled," the senator replied, as he produced the vouchers.

"Caramba! you have lost no time."

"The best things are those done quickly. Take all these documents."

While saying this, Don Rufino threw the papers on the table with an excellent affectation of delight.

At this moment a great noise was heard in the ante-room and a man rushed into the colonel's sanctum, shouting at the top of his lungs, "The Indians! the Indians!"

The colonel and the senator rose. The man was Kidd; his clothes were torn and disordered; his face and hands were covered with blood and dust, and all apparently proved that he had just escaped from a sharp pursuit.

"Is that you, Kidd?" the colonel exclaimed.

"Yes," he replied; "but lose no time, captain; here are the pagans."

Without waiting to hear anything more, the colonel dashed out of the room.

"Where have you come from?" Don Rufino asked the bandit.

The latter gave a start of disappointment on recognising the senator.

"How does that concern you?" the adventurer answered, roughly.

"Some treachery you have been preparing, of course."

"That is possible," he replied, with a knowing grin; "but I am not afraid of you, for you would not dare kill me."

"Why not?"



"In the first place, because it would cause a row, and because I do not think you such a friend of the captain that you would venture to take such a liberty in his house."

"You are mistaken, villain, and you shall have a proof of it."

"Holloa!" the adventurer exclaimed, as he retired precipitately to the door.

But with a gesture rapid as thought Don Rufino seized one of Don Marcos's pistols, cocked it, and ere Kidd could effect the retreat he was meditating he fired, and the adventurer lay on the ground with a bullet in his chest.

"Die, brigand!" the senator shouted, as he threw down the weapon he had used.

"Yes," the bandit muttered, "but not unavenged; your turn will soon arrive——"

And stiffening with a final convulsion, the ruffian expired, retaining on his features even after death an expression of mocking defiance, which caused the senator an involuntary tremor.

"What is the matter here?" the colonel asked, suddenly entering.

"Nothing very important," Don Rufino said, carelessly; "I was carried away by my passion, and settled this scoundrel."

"*Viva Dios!* You were right, senor; I only regret that you have anticipated me, for I have proofs of his treachery. Ho, there! Remove this carrion, and throw it out," he shouted to some soldiers.

The soldiers obeyed, and the adventurer's body was thrown unceremoniously into the street.

"Are the Indians really coming up?"

"The dust raised by their horses' hoofs can already be perceived. I suppose I can reckon on you?"

"*Rayo de Dios!* I should hope so."

"Come, then, for time presses."

Kidd had in reality prepared, with his usual Machiavelism, a new treachery, of which, unluckily for him, he was destined to be the first victim. The whole pueblo was in an uproar; the streets were crowded with soldiers proceeding to their posts.

On the distant plain the body of Indians could be seen through the dust-clouds, coming up at headlong speed.

"They are numerous," the senator whispered to the colonel.

"Too many," the latter answered; "but silence! let us look cheerful."

There were twenty minutes of indescribable anxiety, during which the defenders of the pueblo were enabled to examine their enemies, and form an idea of the terrible danger that menaced them.

Unhappily, the sun was on the point of setting, and it was evident that the red-skins had calculated their march so as to arrive exactly at that moment, and continue the attack through the night.

Suddenly an immense light lit up the plain; the black outlines of the Indians rose like diabolical apparitions, galloping in all directions; a horrible, discordant, and shrill yell echoed in the ears of the Mexicans, and clouds of blazing arrows fell upon them from all sides at once, while the hideous heads of the red-skins appeared on the crest of the entrenchments. Then, in the light of a forest, kindled by the Indians to serve them as a beacon, an obstinate hand-to-hand fight began between the white men and red-skins.

The pueblo was captured; any further resistance became not only impossible, but insensate. Collecting around them all the men they possessed, they dashed to the Plazar Mayor, where, in spite of the fight raging round them, the



squadron picked by Don Marcos had remained motionless, and leaping on their horses, they gave the order to start. Then the little band rushed forward like a hurricane, overthrowing and crushing all the obstacles that stood in their way.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE VENGEANCE OF HEAVEN.

THE marquis's faint lasted but a short time, thanks to the attentions his son and daughter paid him.

"My dear child," he muttered, as he pressed her to his heart, "you are our saviour."

The girl, delighted with this praise, freed herself with a blush.

"Then," she said, with a pretty toss of her head, "you now allow, I think, father, that I have really kept my word."

"Oh, my child," he said, "there are here fifty fortunes."

"Ah, how happy I am! I felt certain that she would not deceive me," cried the girl.

This remark, which escaped from the fulness of Dona Marianna's heart, struck Don Hernando.

"To whom are you alluding, daughter, and who is this person?"

"The one who revealed the existence of this treasure to me, father," she answered.

"Marianno," said the marquis, "you will pass the night here; allow no one to approach this excavation, for it would be imprudent to let strangers know of the existence of such a treasure."

"You can go without fear, *mi amo*," the brave lad answered.

The other four slowly returned to the hacienda, conversing about this marvellous discovery, which, at the moment when all seemed desperate, saved the family. In fact, the gold veins were so rich that it would be possible to detach in a single day enough nearly to cover all the debts contracted by the marquis.

"Well," the marquis said, "you did not dream that so rich a mine existed on the estate."

"In truth, father, some one was kind enough to give me the information."

"But who can this person be, who is better acquainted than myself with a property which has been in the hands of the family more than three hundred years?"

"The probability is that the secret was well kept, father, by the old owners of the soil, of course."

"Nonsense! you are jesting, daughter. Those poor Indians disappeared long ago."

"I am not of that opinion, father," Don Ruiz observed,



"The more so," Paredes struck in, "because I know for a fact that the tribe to which you allude still exists."

"And you know, father, with what religious exactitude the Indians preserve secrets."

"That is true; but in that case some man must have spoken."

"Or some woman," Dona Marianna said, smilingly.

"Well, be it so—a woman," the marquis continued; "that is already a piece of news."

"Unhappily, father, I am prohibited from saying any more."

"Humph! prohibited!"

"Yes, father. However, reassure yourself; this mine is really yours—your lawful property."

On the next morning, by the orders of the marquis, the majordomo selected ten confidential rancheros and peons from those who had sought shelter at the hacienda, and the work commenced at once. The mine had been abandoned exactly in the state in which it was when the body of the miner was found by the Indians; hence the mere sweepings formed a considerable amount, and at the expiration of four or five days the sum collected was sufficient not only to pay off all the debts, but also to leave at the disposal of the marquis a sum thrice as large as he owed.

"My dear child," said the marquis one evening to Dona Marianna, "you have not yet given me an answer on the subject of Don Rufino Contreras' request for your hand; but the week has long since passed."

The young lady blushed, and said, with a slight tremor in her voice—

"Father, I am doubtless highly honoured by this caballero's demand; but do you not think as I do, that the moment is badly chosen for such a thing?"

"Very good, daughter; but if he come himself to seek his answer, what shall we do?"

"It will be time enough to think of it then," she replied, with a laugh.

"Well, well, that is true, and I was wrong to dwell on the matter, so good-night, my child."

"Senor marquis," said Paredes, suddenly opening the door, "excuse my disturbing you so late; but Marianno, the tigrero, has just arrived at the hacienda with his whole family; he is the bearer of such strange and terrible news."

"What does he say?" Don Ruiz asked, who entered the room at this moment.

"He says that the Indians have risen—that they have surprised the Quitovar."

"Oh, that is frightful!" the marquis exclaimed.

"Our poor cousin!" the young man added.

"That is true; our unhappy cousin commanded. What a horrible disaster!"

Marianno was shown in, and related in their fullest details, though with some exaggeration, the events recorded in our last chapter, which threw his hearers into a profound stupor.

This terrible news caused the marquis to reflect deeply. Now that the roads were probably infested with marauders, and communication intercepted by the Indians, he could not think of sending Paredes to Hermosillo, and the journey had become literally impossible.

The whole night was spent in preparations. About two hours after sunrise, at the moment when the marquis, wearied by a long watch, was preparing to



take a little repose, the sentries signalled the approach of a body of horsemen coming at full gallop towards the hacienda.

Some time elapsed ere these horsemen, who were climbing the hill, reached the hacienda gates. Then all doubts were removed: they were soldiers, and a few paces ahead of the troop rode Don Rufino and Colonel Don Marcos. But both leaders and soldiers were in such disorder, so blackened with gunpowder, so covered with dust and blood, that it was plain they had come from a recent fight, from which they had escaped as fugitives. Men and horses were utterly exhausted, not alone by the extraordinary fatigue they had undergone, but also by the gigantic struggle they had sustained ere they dreamed of flight.

Don Marcos de Niza and the senator had hardly the strength to say a few words explanatory of the wretched condition in which they presented themselves, and yielding to fatigue and want of sleep, they fell down in a state of complete insensibility, from which no attempt was made to rouse them, but they were both carried to bed.

At three in the afternoon a fresh band of horsemen was signalled in the plain. This considerable party was composed entirely of hunters and wood-rangers. Don Ruiz gave orders not to open.

"You cannot have looked, nino," said the majordomo, "when you order such a thing."

"On the contrary, I do so because I have looked," he replied.

"Then you must have seen badly," the majordomo said; "otherwise you would have perceived that the horseman at their head is one of your most devoted friends."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Who else than Stronghand?"

The hunters had no necessity even of parleying; they found the hacienda gates wide open, and rode straight in without drawing rein. Don Ruiz recognised Stronghand, who, on his side, rode up to him and held out his hand.

"Grant me one favour, Don Ruiz," he said.

"Speak," the young man answered.

"Two words of conversation in your sister's presence; but wait a moment, another person must accompany you. Do you consent?"

Don Ruiz hesitated.

"What do you fear?" the hunter continued; "do you not put your faith in me?"

"I pledge you my word."

The hunter gave a signal, and a horseman dismounted and came up to them. A long cloak entirely covered him, and the broad brim of his hat was pulled down over his eyes. He bowed silently to the young man, who, though greatly perplexed by this mystery, made no remark; and after requesting the majordomo to take care of the new-comers, he led his guests to the room in which Dona Marianna was seated. The young lady, on hearing the door open, mechanically raised her eyes.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, joyfully, "Stronghand!"

"Myself, senorita," the young man replied; "I have come to ask the fulfilment of your promise."

"Ruiz," she said to her brother, eagerly, "until further orders, my father must not know of the presence of these caballeros here."

"What you ask of me is very difficult, sister; think of the responsibility I assume."



"I know it, Ruiz; but it must be, my dear brother, for my happiness is at stake," she continued. "Do you not know this hunter?"

"Yes, I know him; I am even under great obligations to him; but his companion?"

At this moment a sound of footsteps was heard in the adjoining room.

"What is to be done?" the maiden murmured.

Stronghand laid his finger on his lips, and leading away his companion—who, through the thick cloak he wore, resembled a phantom rather than a man—disappeared behind the curtain. At the same instant the door opened, and two persons entered. They were Don Marcos and the senator. They had scarce exchanged the first compliments with Don Ruiz and Dona Marianna when the marquis entered the room.

"You are up at last, I am happy to see," he said, cheerfully.

"A thousand thanks, cousin, for your hospitality, of which we stood in great need."

"I am the more pleased at the chance, Don Rufino, as I intended to write to you immediately."

"My dear sir," the senator said, with a bow.

"Are you not expecting an answer from me?"

"I suppose I did not dare to hope."

"Let us come to the most important point first," continued the marquis, with a smile. "Don Rufino, you have behaved to me like a real friend. By a miracle, I am in a position to arrange my affairs, and discharge my debt to you."

"Obligations far greater than you suppose," the colonel said.

"Don Rufino, unaware of the happy change in your fortunes, and wishing to save you from the frightful position in which you were, had bought up all your liabilities, and so soon as he had all the vouchers in his possession, he hurried with them to me, and implored me to destroy them. Here they are, cousin," he added.

The various actors in this singular scene were affected by strange feelings. Don Ruiz and his sister exchanged a look of despair.

"Oh!" the marquis exclaimed, "I cannot accept such an act of generosity."

"From a stranger, certainly not," Don Rufino remarked; "but I flattered myself that I was not such."

"What is going on at this moment is so strange; I feel taken so unawares," the marquis presently continued; "my thoughts are so confused that I must beg you, Don Rufino, to defer till to-morrow the remainder of this conversation."

"My dear sir, I understand the delicacy of your remarks, and will wait as long as you think proper," the senator replied.

"Yes," said the colonel; "let us put off serious matters till to-morrow."

"What has happened to you? The pagans have not seized the Mineral de Quitovar? or at least I hope not."

"Yes, they have, cousin; the pueblo has been captured by the red-skins, sacked, and burnt."

"That is disastrous news, cousin; I had been told of it."

"It is unhappily but too true."

"Well, thank heaven, cousin, you are in safety here. As for you, Don Rufino, I am happy that you escaped from the horrible massacre; you are not a soldier, you are——"

"An assassin!" a sepulchral voice suddenly exclaimed.

The company turned with horror. Stronghand's companion had let fall the



hat and cloak that disguised him, and was standing, stern and menacing, behind the senator.

"Oh!" the latter exclaimed, as he recoiled with terror, "Don Rodolfo!"

"Brother, do I see you again after so many years?" the marquis said, joyfully.

"The great sachem," Dona Marianna murmured.

The sachem thrust back with a gesture of sovereign contempt the startled senator, and walked into the centre.

"Yes, it is I, brother; I, the proscrip, the disinherited, who enter the house of my father after an absence of twenty years, in order to save the last representative of my family."

"Oh, brother, brother!" the marquis exclaimed, sorrowfully.

"Recover yourself, Hernando! I entertain no feeling of hatred or rancour for you. Come to my arms, brother; let us forget the past, only to think of the joy of being reunited."

The marquis threw himself into his brother's arms; Don Ruiz and Dona Marianna imitated him, and for some minutes there was an uninterrupted interchange of embraces among the members of this family.

"It was through me that you received the sum which Paredes was to receive at Hermosillo," Don Rodolfo continued; "to me you also owe the discovery of the gold mine which has saved you. This man," he said, pointing to the senator, who was trembling with rage and terror—"this man was my valet; in order to rob me, he attempted to assassinate me cowardly, treacherously, behind my back. Such is the man whose dark machinations had succeeded in deceiving you, and to whom you were on the point of giving your daughter."

"Oh!" the senator muttered, with a furious gesture.

"Villain!" the marquis exclaimed; "help! help! seize the monster!"

Several servants rushed into the room, but before they could reach Don Rufino the latter had bounded with a tiger leap upon Don Rodolfo and buried a dagger in his chest. The sachem fell back with a cry of pain into the arms of his brother and son.

"Now," said the assassin, "you can do whatever you like to me, for I am avenged."

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### THE FUNERAL OF A SACHEM.

Two days had elapsed since the atrocious attack made by Don Rufino on Don Rodolfo. The Papazos had captured the hacienda without a blow, as the gates were opened to them; for the stupor and terror of the Mexicans at this horrible crime were so great that they forgot all precautions. But we must do the red-skins the justice of stating that, contrary to their habits, they committed no excesses in the hacienda.

Don Hernando was inconsolable, and the colonel could not forgive himself



for having supposed for a moment that the senator was an honest man. The whole hacienda was plunged into sorrow, and Don Rodolfo alone watched death approach with a calm brow. Fray Serapio dressed his wound; his night was tolerably quiet, and in the morning the monk entered the wounded man's room.

"Now, padre," he said, "it is our turn;" and he helped him to remove the bandages.

"I am condemned, am I not?" said Don Rodolfo.

"God can perform a miracle," the Franciscan stammered, in a faint voice.

"I understand you," replied the sachem; "answer me, therefore, frankly and sincerely. How many hours have I still to live?"

"What good is that, my dear, good master?" the monk murmured.

"Padre Serapio," said the chief, "I want to know in order that I may settle my affairs on earth."

The poor man stifled a sigh, and answered, in a voice broken by emotion—"Unless a miracle occur, you will give back your soul to your Creator at sunset."

"I thank you, my friend," the sachem said. "Ask my brother to come here, for I have to talk with him. Keep back my wife and niece until I ask for them."

The worthy monk withdrew, choked with sobs. The interview of the two brothers was long, for Don Hernando had many faults to ask pardon for at the hands of him whose place he had taken. But Don Rodolfo, far from reproaching him, tried on the contrary to console him, by talking to him in a cheerful voice, and reminding him of the happy days of their childhood. He also thanked his brother warmly for having freed him from the heavy burden of supporting the family honour, and allowing him to live in accordance with his tastes and humour.

Dona Marianna and Dona Esperanza then returned to the dying man's room, followed by Padre Serapio, and a few moments afterwards the marquis came back, accompanied by Stronghand. The young man, in spite of his Indian education and affected stoicism, knelt down sobbing by his father's side.

"Come here, niece," Don Rodolfo at length said, addressing Dona Marianna.

The maiden knelt down sobbing by the hunter's side. The aged man looked for a moment tenderly at their two young faces, pale with sorrow, which were piously leaning over him; then he said, in a voice that trembled with emotion: "Niece, answer me as you would answer God; for the dying, you know, no longer belong to this world. Do you love my son?"

"Yes, uncle," the maiden answered through her tears—"yes, I love him."

"And you, Diego, my son, do you love your cousin?"

"Father, I love her," the young man answered, in a voice crushed by emotion.

"Bless our children, brother," said Don Rodolfo; "according to the wish you expressed to me, Padre Serapio will unite them in our presence."

The wounded man stretched out his trembling hands over the two young people.

"Children," he said, in a powerful voice, though with an accent of ineffable tenderness, "I bless you: be happy."

And, crushed by the efforts he had been forced to make, he fell back in a half-fainting state on his bed. When he regained consciousness, through the attention of Dona Esperanza and his niece, he perceived an altar by the side of the bed. On his expressing a desire that the ceremony should take place at



once, Padre Serapio, assisted by Jose Paredes, who was weeping bitterly, read the marriage mass.

"And now, my friends," said Don Rodolfo, "that I have accomplished my duties as a Christian and Spanish gentleman, it is time for me to perform my duties as an Indian chief."

The doors opened, and the warriors entered: they were sad, gloomy, and thoughtful. The sachem had sat up to receive them, supported by his son, Stronghand. The warriors silently surrounded the bed on which their venerated chief lay, among them being Sparrowhawk and Peccari.

"The chiefs," said Peccari, "and the great braves of the confederation, assembled at sunrise round the council-fire: they desire, in order that no discord may spring up among them, that our father, the great sachem, should himself appoint his successor; for they feel persuaded that our father's choice will fall on a brave and wise chief, worthy to command men."

"Be it so," said the sachem; "the determination of the sachems is wise. Sparrowhawk will command in my place when I am called away by the Great Spirit."

Sparrowhawk quitted the ranks, stepped forward, and bowed respectfully.

"I thank my father," he said, "for the signal honour he has done me; but I am very young to command chiefs and renowned warriors. My father leaves a son."

"My son is a pale-face. Sparrowhawk will command."

"I obey my father; but Stronghand will ever be one of our great chiefs."

A flattering murmur greeted these clever remarks.

"I thank my son Sparrowhawk. Modesty becomes a chief so celebrated as is my son," the sachem continued; "the Great Spirit will inspire him. Do the chiefs approve my choice?"

"We could not have chosen better," Peccari answered. "We sincerely thank our father for having anticipated our dearest wishes by choosing Sparrowhawk."

The sachem continued—

"I feel my strength rapidly leaving me, and life is abandoning me; the Great Spirit will soon call me to him. My sons will carry me beneath a tent of my nation."

Stronghand, the marquis, Peccari, and Sparrowhawk gently lifted the wounded man on their shoulders, and carried him to the front yard of the hacienda, followed by all the rest, who walked silently and thoughtfully in the rear. A lodge formed of stakes covered with buffalo hides had been prepared to receive the great chief.

All eyes were turned towards the dying sachem, by whose side were standing the members of his family, Padre Serapio, and the principal chiefs of the Papazos.

All at once a nervous tremor passed over the dying man's body; his cheeks were tinged; his half-closed eyes opened again; he sat up without any extraneous help, and shouted, in a strong, clear voice, which was heard by all:—"I come, Lord! Papazos, farewell! Esperanza! Esperanza! we shall meet again!"

His eyes closed; a livid pallor spread over his face; his limbs stiffened, and he fell back heavily as he exhaled his last sigh. He was dead.

"Our father is dead!" Sparrowhawk shouted, in a thundering voice.

"Vengeance!" the red-skins yelled.

In fact the murderer of the chief was still alive. The white men who did not



wish to witness the horrible scene that was about to take place withdrew. Stronghand, the colonel, Paredes, and Marianno alone remained.

We will not describe the horrible details of the punishment inflicted on the senator. Enough that he was flayed alive, and all his joints cut off in succession.

Then the chosen warriors took the body of the sachem, and proceeded by torchlight to the huerta, where the hacienda overhung the precipice. The corpse was tied on the back of the sachem's magnificent steed by deerskin thongs, holding his totems in one hand and his gun in the other. Then, amid the sobs of the squaws, the horse was led to the plateau, where the Papazo warriors, mounted and dressed in their war paint, formed a semicircle, whose ends reached the precipice.

By the glare of the torches—whose flames, agitated by the wind, imparted a fantastic aspect to the gloomy and stern landscape in this part of the huerta—the horse was placed in the midst of the semi-circle, and the horsemen, brandishing their weapons, struck up their war-song with a savage energy. The startled horse bounded on to the plateau, bearing the corpse, to which each of its bounds imparted such an oscillating movement that the rider appeared to be restored to life. On reaching the brink of the precipice the horse recoiled with terror, with flaming nostrils; then, suddenly turning round, it tried to burst the living rampart, which was constantly contracted behind it. Several times the animal renewed the same exertions; but at last, attacked by a paroxysm of terror, pursued by the yells of the Indians, and wounded by their long lances, it rose on its hind legs, uttered a terrible snort, and leaped into the gulf with its burden.

On the morrow, at sunrise, the red-skins left the hacienda, to which they did not once return during the whole of the war, which lasted three years.

THE END.



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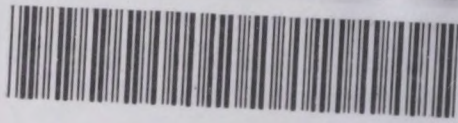








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